Lawyers, Guns, and Money

by auburn

Summary

Everyone has their own agenda when Pegasus' favorite pirates visit Earth to negotiate an alliance. Or possibly just to do some shopping. But it threatens to blow up in everyone's face when Gibbs' refusal to let go of an investigation puts Vala's crew at odds with the Tau'ri.

Notes

If there's a tag missing, please let me know, but please, for your own comfort, pay attention to those I used. Characters have a variety of sexualities; they aren't what the story is about, so they aren't tagged.
Chapter 1

Gibbs

Gibbs blew through the office with a coffee in one hand and his jacket in the other, announcing, "Navel test pilot, Pax River. Let's move."

Like obedient ducklings, his team fell in behind him. Ducklings. Damn it. No. He'd been a duckling once, long ago in a land far away. He tried to ignore that he had used his own teams as mercilessly over the years as Tyotia had used Vanya and Zhenya and their Jenny Bird. It was too uncomfortable to reflect that he'd done as bad with less reason.

Since he'd left the realm of the Duchess of Deception, Gibbs had learned to lie to himself at least as well as he did anyone else.

The locals had the crime scene blocked off as much as possible. Traffic was shifted to a single lane back and forth behind a follow car. At least one jackass was using his car horn to bray.

Unless Palmer found something to contradict it, Gibbs would bet the incident occurred between midnight and four. The base received plenty of traffic and a passerby had noticed the tire marks and stopped to check the crashed vehicle shortly after dawn on his way to work there.

The morning was just heating up with the sun reflecting off the official vehicles drawn to the scene like flies. The olive-green and black cruiser blocking the second lane had its flashers lazily cycling red and blue. Gibbs slowed and showed his NCIS ID to the trooper and was waved through.

McGee and the truck had caught up when Gibbs slowed down.

Torres climbed out of Gibbs’ Charger looking a little unsteady. Bishop had chosen to ride with McGee.

"McGee, laser and sketch. Torres, pictures and video. Don't just stand there, do your jobs," Gibbs snapped at them. "Bishop, with me."

He noted the heavy skids marks on the pavement, the broken railing along the mild embankment, and the place where another vehicle had parked. Glass glinted bright enough to be fresh.

"I want tire casts, and make sure Torres gets pictures of any shoe prints," he reminded Bishop. The long grass beyond the safety railing was mashed down and just beginning to straighten in places. Not good for foot prints, but they might get something down where the sky-blue sports car had rolled into the ditch if the ground was moist.

The Maryland State Police Sergeant running the scene was younger than Gibbs but lately it felt like everyone was. At least he wasn't some kid; he was a stocky six-footer with a salt-and-pepper crewcut, spit-shined shoes, and an ironed-sharp uniform.

"Gibbs, NCIS."

"Arbaugh." He nodded toward the rolled car. "Kid on his way to work at the base spotted it. Manny Lopez. Parked on the other side of the road, phoned it in and then went down to check for survivors. He stayed on the phone the whole time."
"I'll want that transcript."

"You'll get it."

Arbaugh started walking them down toward the car. "Driver was shot in the head. Lopez checked for anyone else in or thrown from the car then came back up and waited. Car has a base parking sticker. First trooper to arrive ran the plate after securing the scene. It's a 1966 Mustang registered to Alan Reinhart. Call to the base confirmed that Alan Reinhart is a navy commander assigned there. That's when the captain bumped up the priority and they called your people."

"Thanks for the fast work."

Arbaugh rolled his shoulders. "It looks to me like someone else was in the car. My boys and girls are good, but my gut's telling me this one is a shitfest. We've got enough work; you're welcome to it."

"Lopez still here?"

"Yeah, we held onto him. He's been interviewed, but I knew you'd want to do it again."

"You're not wrong. Bishop. Interview. And get his prints, along with pictures and a cast of his shoes for exclusion." She gave him a nod and took off without comment or a joke.

Gibbs' fingers itched. He missed Tony's irreverent and inappropriate commentary and the opportunity it always gave him to vent his own frustrations with a slap to his head. They'd had no contact since Tony left for Paris with his daughter and Senior. Now he had a taste of what it had been like when he'd taken off to Mexico and cut ties.

Ducky and Palmer handled the body, hmming and hawing as usual over committing to cause of death, but tentatively confirming Gibbs' timeline. They also pulled out Commander Reinhart's wallet, confirming the ID that warranted NCIS involvement.

Once the body was gone Gibbs arranged with Arbaugh for the wrecker to take Reinhart's car to the Navy Yard for Abby to check. Bishop had finished with the witness, so they let him go and the Staties opened the road to two-lane traffic again.

"Where next, boss?" Torres asked as they finished up.

"You and McGee head back with the evidence and log it in, and then I want everything you can uncover about our Navy commander. Bishop and I will talk to his co-workers at the base."

"Do we get lunch in there somewhere?" Torres asked.

"Depends on if you get me a lead."

Commander Reinhart, USN, was a test pilot at the Air Station attached to Pax River. By the end of the day Gibbs knew the officer had been considered a first-rate pilot, a decent officer, and most of those serving or working with him liked or at worst were indifferent to him. His greatest vice had been his restored Mustang. Like most pilots, he collected speeding tickets.

The previous day he'd been visited by an old friend and fellow test pilot, named Col. Louis Young, USAF. Young had hung around while Reinhart finished some paperwork and they'd left to go to dinner. A plan to return and pick up Reinhart's Mustang and let Young get behind the wheel later
had been mentioned.

Commander Reinhart was unmarried, no dependents, no debt, no trouble that McGee could dig up or anyone on base mentioned. No enemies, no secrets. But he'd been run off the road shortly after midnight and a bullet put through his head.

Reinhart's life might have been an open book but the missing Air Force colonel was another story.

Colonel Louis Young was a goddamn mystery in addition to being missing. Abby had lifted his fingerprints from the passenger side of the Mustang. McGee had obtained the video record of the Commander and the Colonel both in the Mustang leaving the base shortly after midnight.

According the Air Force, Young had gone from hotshot test pilot to pushing papers for the 10th Space Warning Squadron based out of Grand Forks AFB. Which made it a little strange he was paying rent on a condo in Nevada and attempts to contact his commanding officer were diverted through Groom Lake AFB and pinging people at NORAD and the Pentagon. Young was receiving combat and hazardous duty pay while 'stationed' in Grand Forks too.

Gibbs found himself glaring at the picture of the missing colonel on the plasma screen. He needed more coffee. Young was an Air Force spook or he'd take up decaf. Arbaugh had been right: this case stunk of a shitfest.

Nothing pissed him off more than a good officer dying as collateral damage to black ops. Reinhart had been murdered because he was inconvenient to the kidnapping of Young.

If he wanted Reinhart's murderers, they were going to have to find out why Young had been taken.

That wouldn't be impossible, but he knew it wouldn't be easy either. NCIS had a strong case to keep investigating Reinhart's death, but the Air Force would have an equally strong one to take over the search for Young.

"Find out what Young was really doing," he ordered McGee. He turned to head for the elevator and a trip to the cart where he could get coffee and one of Abby's abominable Caff-Pows. A little bribery would keep his team's tests at the top of the forensic expert's to-do lists.

The elevator opened before he could reach the control and Gibbs stopped cold.

"Better and fucking better."

"Gibbs," Jack O'Neill greeted him, before his gaze moved past Gibbs to the second level overlooking the bullpen, where Vance was waiting.

_Jesus fucking Christ wept._ Major General Jonathan O'Neill, two stars shining on his shoulders, a major and colonel trailing him like the train on a wedding gown. The Air Force had to be hard up to promote Batshit Jack and send him to the Pentagon. And now he was in Gibbs’ territory, no doubt about to try to horn in on Gibbs’ investigation.

He hadn't seen Jack since Jenny's funeral. He'd already been a general then, to Gibbs' disgust. They hadn't spoken. He hadn't missed that Jack walked Hetty Lange back to her car, though. Thick as thieves, those two. He'd never shaken the hunch one or both had known more about how Jenny died than they should have, either, but Jenny's fuck-up in Paris meant everything was swept under the rug.

Jack had always played hardball. _Necessary sacrifices._ Sophia's blood had run red in the snow and Jack's brown eyes were colder than the permafrost.
The worst part was knowing Jack wouldn't have trusted Jenny's word in Paris and that maybe if Gibbs hadn't, she'd still be here.

Vance was expressionless. He nodded to O'Neill, then his gaze drifted past Gibbs to his team at their desks. Dig. Looking at Young hadn't told them anything, but O'Neill showing up gave them another lead to explore. Young was more important than he looked on paper. They were connected and that might be enough to crack open the truth.

"Nice to see you too," Jack sniped in response to Gibbs' stony silence as he walked by. The major and the colonel, both a little too fit to have been riding Pentagon desks exclusively, side-eyed him as they followed Jack toward Vance's office.

Gibbs marched back to his people and started giving orders.

"General Jonathan O'Neill. I want everything. He's tied up to Young somehow."

"Boss," McGee started tentatively. "Are you sure?"

Gibbs narrowed his eyes. "Batshit Jack was one of Hetty Lange's darlings. He might have gone back to the Air Force, but if he's here, Young was deep in dirt. Find out what!" He managed to keep his voice low, but the anger cracked through it.

The way they scrambled to appease him, wide-eyed and cowed, soothed some of Gibbs' temper, even while he felt a little sick at the way he treated them. He knew there were better leadership styles. He told himself this worked for him and anyone who didn't like it, who couldn't take it, could transfer. My way or the highway. A headache twinged behind his eyes, reminding him he hadn't got that coffee.

The annoying beep of his phone let him dismiss any self-reflection. It was Vance, terse and hiding annoyance. "Gibbs, my office, now."

He didn't bother answering, just cut the call, and pocketed the phone.

"Keep working," he snapped at the team. "I want answers when I'm back."

"Sir, yes sir," Torres replied sarcastically. Gibbs gritted his teeth. He'd recruited Torres to fill the hole in the team Tony left. Someone cocky and experienced with more than a computer screen, who could handle undercover if necessary, but Torres wasn't the investigator Tony had been, and most irritating of all Gibbs had to reign himself in with him. Torres wouldn't tolerate the treatment that Tony, who craved even borderline abusive attention, had.

Thinking about Tony led him to thinking of Tony's kid and Ziva and that feeling of betrayal that they'd broken Rule 12 so damn thoroughly they ended up choosing each other over the team. Gibbs was seething when he stepped into Vance's office.

Jack had the gall to grin at him.

"Gibbs, this General O'Neill, Colonel Davis, and Major Garley. They're here about the disappearance of Colonel Young when Commander Reinhart was killed."

No shit.

"Sorry about Reinhart."

O'Neill even meant it. He didn't flinch at necessary sacrifice but unless the general's stars had
changed him, he'd never wasted lives. Don't waste good. They'd both learned at their tyotia's knee, back when they served in the court of smoke and mirrors. Gibbs had made it one of his rules.

He thought O'Neill had got out after Poland, gone back to the Air Force, though still special ops. But maybe not, or O'Neill had been drawn back after what happened to his kid and the divorce the way Gibbs had ended up working that op in Paris with Jenny after he lost Shannon and Kelly.

But Gibbs had come back investigating for NCIS and O'Neill must have plunged deeper down the rabbit hole.

"Colonel Young was about to take over a classified operation. He'd been confirmed for the position and read-in," O'Neill said. "He has a lot of high level information that an enemy could use."

"Like what?"

"That's above your pay grade," O'Neill sounded tired, not gloating, but maybe he'd gotten better at the political game while climbing the promotional ladder. Gibbs had never been able to read him or Hetty reliably.

"So, what was he doing in Pax River?" he demanded.

"He was taking some leave before starting his new job," came the wry reply from Jack. "Visiting an old friend. Some people do stay in touch."

Gibbs ignored the gibe. Jack and he had never been friends beyond what it took to work together. They hadn't been friends either; Hetty never let that shit fly. Jack hadn't exactly reached out to him either, but in the way of things he'd heard what happened to Jack's son and it had cut close enough that Gibbs had preferred to pretend he didn't know.

Shannon and Kelly… At least it hadn't been his own gun. If it had been, Gibbs would have eaten his afterward.


"And the Joint Chiefs and the President," Jack added.

Vance swallowed his ire and nodded. "...Are concerned with recovering Col. Young and uncovering any security breaches resulting from his abduction."

"What he knows is that hot?"

"Hot enough the President has just told your Director to play nice with me and mine," Jack replied.

"Your team will fold in Colonel Davis and an investigator from General O'Neill's office. Both already have top clearance and will handle any classified information above yours," Vance announced. At least he didn't look any happier than Gibbs felt. Davis would spy for O'Neill and make sure the MCRT stayed away from anything the Air Force didn't want them to know. Jesus, this was already a goat fuck. Gibbs hated spooks.

They'd have to work around the Colonel and whoever this 'investigator' turned out to be. Another goddamn spook or an idiot zoomie, probably, there to put up roadblocks. Gibbs glared at O'Neill.

"Paul here's a smart guy, Gibbs. He has access you don't. Instead of wasting your time trying to keep in him the dark, use him," O'Neill said, proving he still could read Gibbs.
"If I hear you've obstructed General O'Neill's people's access to the investigation, I will pull you from this case," Vance said.

_Thanks, Leon, always good to know who has your back._ And who doesn't. Leon was a political animal interested in becoming more than the Director of a minor Federal agency most people had never heard of, something that bore remembering. There was a lot of leeway to be taken advantage of before Vance had to hear about anything, though.

O'Neill stood and Garley snapped to attention. Davis moved smoother, less impressed by his superior's brass. E-ring political shark, Gibbs would bet. He had that Pentagon polish. No way to guess if there was any substance under the uniform, though Jack wouldn’t trust anyone stupid with anything important.

Which would tell Gibbs whether this investigation's success was important to Jack or not. If Davis wasn't competent, then this was just Jack blowing more smoke.

"Well," Jack said and dusted his palms against each other, "I've got a thing with the Secretary of Defense, so I'll leave you all. Paul, I'm leaving you here."

"I can call for a pool car if I need one," Davis agreed placidly.

Garley stood ready to open the door. Jack eyed Gibbs. "Jethro, I'd tell you not to be too much of a bastard, but that horse left the barn years ago." He smirked. "Luckily, Paul is tougher than he looks."

"I wasn't aware you and Gibbs knew each other," Vance remarked.

"Oh, we got up to some redacted hijinks in the bad old days before the Iron Curtain rusted away," Jack replied. He glanced at his watch. "Oh, good. My investigator should be here by now." Gibbs wanted to punch the smug smile off his face. "You've worked together before."

Jack faced Vance again. "Director, if we weren't here because of a dead man, I'd say it had been a pleasure. The Air Force appreciates your cooperation."

Vance replied with something equally flowery and untrue. NCIS never cooperated if it didn't have to and was never happy or gracious about it.

Gibbs lingered in the office as Jack and Garley left. Davis gave nothing away as he nodded to Vance and headed down to the bullpen after a quiet, "Nice to meet you, Director."

When the door had snicked closed, Gibbs said, "Leon."

Vance rocked back in his desk chair. "Gibbs."

"This is bullshit," Gibbs burst out, "and you know it! They're going to spy on us so they can make sure whatever dirty business they're up to doesn't end up on the six o'clock news. That colonel is here to make sure we don't find out what's really going on."

"I know," Vance agreed. "What do you want me to do about it?"

"What?"

"I got a call from the President. He told me to do what O'Neill wants or someone who will can have this office."
"Sonovabitch!"

"Solve the case, Gibbs. Cooperate until they choke and solve the case anyway."

"Great, just great," Gibbs muttered as he slammed out of the office.

O'Neill and his flunky were gone, but Davis was standing next to Bishop's desk talking to a tall woman with her back to Gibbs.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded before the smooth blond hair and the set of her shoulders and a thousand other unnamable things identified her to him.

Hollis Mann turned and gave him a cool smile. "Hello, Gibbs."

"You retired," he accused her.

"I did. I even got married, but it didn't stick," Hollis said easily. "I got bored."

"And now you work for O'Neill."

"Homeland. Don't look so sour. I'm a good investigator and we've worked together before."

Not when she was playing footsie with Batshit Jack. Hollis understood how an investigation worked; it would be damned hard to pull off anything behind her back. *Jesus, whose Wheaties had he pissed in to get this screwed over?*
Chapter 2

Ellie Bishop

She loved working in the field instead of analysis and interrogation. Ellie had to remind herself of this at least once every day. Gibbs had a sort of charisma that drew her and others in, striving to measure up to his standards. She suspected no one actually could, that the bar would just be raised repeatedly. But she kept trying, wanting one of those terse nods of approval.

It was hard to imagine working for Gibbs as long as McGee had, never mind DiNozzo. She wondered if Tony missed it, wherever he'd gone. She knew Gibbs missed him. She'd seen him turn, looking for DiNozzo, pause, waiting for a joke or movie comparison.

Well, at least they had a clue. Maybe it would distract him from the Air Force guy and the cool drink of water blonde from the DoD who had greeted McGee familiarly.

"Gibbs," she said crisply, before he could start snarling. "Abby came back with a paint color from the scraping off Commander Reinhart's car. Tim and Nick have been going through all the traffic cam footage for every intersection the road from the crime scene goes through."

Tim picked up the narrative.

"The paint is Ford factory black, but it’s a formulation they only used between 2014 and 2016, which narrowed the search. A 2015 Ford Escalade was reported stolen yesterday morning by its owner, Jeremy Geishweld, a pharmaceutical rep who had been out of town for the last week."

Up on the plasma screen, a picture of Jeremy Geishweld's driver's license was superseded by blurry black-and-white screengrab of an SUV with a crumpled passenger side fender and one broken headlight.

"The glass recovered from the roadside at the crime scene matches Ford factory parts," Tim continued. "We got this from a traffic cam. The screengrab showed a time stamp for 0113. "One-thirteen in the morning."

"I want BOLO and APB out on that vehicle," Gibbs rapped out.

"I can do something better than that, boss," Tim said. The smug jerk. He was tapping away at his keyboard. "That model has Wi-Fi and GPS. I just need to access satellite – " He typed in a fast series of commands Ellie couldn't follow and a satellite map took over the plasma screen with a red pin captioned with the stolen Escalade's license next to it. "Got a location and an address."

"Nice work," Colonel Davis murmured in approval, sparking another icy glare from Gibbs. What, did he think only he got to praise the team, or maybe that Davis would try to poach Tim? Other agencies had tried and been brushed off, but Gibbs always seemed oblivious. He'd never acknowledged the FBI's standing offer to hire Tony away either.

"Get everything – "

"On the place. On it," Torres interrupted.

Colonel Davis had his phone out to make a call. With startling speed, Gibbs snatched it out of his
hands. "Who are you calling?"

Colonel Davis remained imperturbable. "I have a rapid response team trained in hostage rescue and recovery on stand-by." He plucked the phone out of Gibbs' hand. "I was calling to ask for an ETA from where they are to the address your team uncovered."

"You don't do anything I don't tell you," Gibbs said repressively.

"You've actually gotten worse," Ms. Mann commented. "You'd rather see someone killed than admit you can't do it all by yourself."

"I don't trust you."

Ellie winced.

Gibbs stalked away toward the break room and the awful coffee there.

"Sorry, Colonel -- " Tim started once Gibbs was out of earshot.

"I'm retired from the Army, Tim. You can just call me Hollis," she said, looking in the direction Gibbs had gone. Ellie couldn't read her expression.

Colonel Davis made a face, though. "You worked with this guy?"

"Yes," Hollis replied and then shocked Ellie and Torres by adding, "I dated him too."

Tim must have been around for that, since he just snorted under his breath.

Torres shook his head. "There are mysteries in this world I don't want the answers to."

Gibbs

He got two paper cups of coffee and returned. Hollis left her hip-perch on McGee's desk and followed him to the conference room when he jerked his head in that direction.

She took the coffee with a wry smile. Even bad coffee was coffee. He'd seen Hollis drink tea, though, and who knew what habits she'd picked up in Hawaii. Nothing that had ultimately kept her there, though. It was petty, but it pleased him that she hadn't taken to retirement -- or marriage -- any better than he had.

"You really want Young back alive?" he asked bluntly.

"Yes, Jethro. We'd like to know if and what he told the people who took him, not to mention who they are."

"You don't know?"

"If we knew, we'd have taken this investigation away from NCIS."

"The hell you would."

"Yes, Jethro," she repeated, and the calm condescension made him grit his teeth. "You could stomp
your feet and shake your fists and it wouldn't make even the tiniest difference."

She made it sound like he threw a tantrum every time he didn't get his way.

"What the hell are you into?" he demanded.

Hollis made a face at the cup still in her hand and set it on the conference table. She still carried herself with the smooth grace and straight military posture he'd admired from the first. He'd never intimidated her, never even impressed her. He'd liked that. They'd been easy together.

"I really can't tell you. The fact that you don't know is what makes your team useful."

Gibbs repeated that in his head and cursed out loud.

"Exactly," Hollis agreed.

"Who knew Young was going to meet Reinhart?"

"No one. He was in DC for his confirmation. He had some leave time and knew once he took over his new post he wouldn't be free again for months. He was scheduled to fly back today."

"And he got snatched during the only window when he wouldn't be in a public or secure area after being confirmed and read-in."

Hollis nodded. "Also before he received a subcutaneous tracker that would have let us find him as soon as we knew to look."

Gibbs kept himself from twitching at the thought of accepting a microchip and transmitter under his skin. McGee could remotely turn on a phone and use its microphone to listen in on whoever had it, if it had a battery in it. He'd bet someone could use the technology Hollis was talking about to bug them.

Zero privacy might bothering him, but that wasn't pertinent to what Hollis had just revealed. Jack's people might genuinely want Young back alive, but they wanted who took him even more, so they could tug that thread until it led back to their own people.

"You've got a mole."

She nodded again and murmured, "Let's just hope it's not a snake."

Ellie Bishop

Gibbs wouldn't wait, and Colonel Davis and Ms. Mann agreed with him. Instead of insisting they wait and watch the rental where the stolen Escalade had stopped, they came along with the team. Colonel Davis even came up with real-time satellite coverage of the house, including heat signatures. Ellie wasn't sure even the NSA could manage that, and they certainly couldn't re-task a satellite in under half an hour. There were things called orbits that the Air Force seemed able to just ignore.

It made her wonder what else they had that no one knew about.

Colonel Young probably knew about Air Force satellites; that would be why he was snatched.
Commander Reinhart was just collateral damage.

The Escalade was inside the rental house's attached garage. The house itself was supposed to be empty, scheduled for remodeling in the next month, and far enough from the beaten path no one would notice anyone coming and going. If the kidnappers had just stolen an older vehicle it might have taken days longer to find them.

They parked far enough out no one inside would have heard the car engines and the telltale cut-off and walked in.

"Hollis, with me. Torres, you and Bishop take the back. McGee, stick with Colonel Davis and make sure they don't get out through the garage," Gibbs instructed.

Gibbs obviously trusted Ms. Mann more than Colonel Davis. Ellie still wished Reeves wasn't off handling a case that crossed interests with the British Embassy on Vance's orders.

"Let's go," Torres said in a low voice and they circled the house, keeping low and away from any sightlines from the windows, until they reached the back. "Safety off," Torres reminded her.

Ellie's face burned. She was very good about remembering to check the safety was on, but the last time they'd gone through a door together she forgotten to take it off. It had been okay; the petty officer they'd arrested had gone quietly, but Torres had spotted it and called her on it later.

At least he hadn't said anything where Gibbs would hear.

She held up her weapon where Torres could see she had it ready, finger lying alongside the trigger mechanism. She really didn't want to trip and fire accidentally. The paperwork was horrible, not to mention the ribbing she'd never live down, and whatever Gibbs would say.

Torres flashed her a grin.

They breached the door into the kitchen a second after Gibbs went through the front. Ellie heard Gibbs yelling that they were Federal agents, gunshots, running. Then a big man tore through the doorway, shoulder-checked Torres into the table and chairs in a crash and brought a pistol up with the clear intention of shooting her.

Reflex and practice had Ellie in a shooting stance, her off hand supporting the other. She aimed and fired on her inhale, absorbing the kickback the way she'd been trained, ready to fire again. Her target fired a fraction of a second later, but shock and the impact of a bullet to his chest sent his shot through the window over the sink. He staggered back into the doorway, hit a wall, and slid down it, the exit wound leaving a vivid streak of crimson blood.

Torres had scrambled free of a chair and aimed his own weapon at the man as Gibbs and Mann came down the hall.

"Okay?" Gibbs asked.

"Yeah," Torres confirmed.

Ellie set the safety on her weapon and holstered it. Her ears were ringing. Mann nudged the suspect's pistol – a 9mm Beretta or a knock-off – away with her foot, then crouched by the man Ellie had shot and checked his neck for a pulse. She looked up and shook her head.

"Center mass," Torres commented. "Good shot."
"It would have been nice to have someone left to question," Mann said, but she glared at Gibbs, not Ellie.

Ellie cleared her throat. It felt burned and all she could smell was cordite and the sudden stink as the dead man's bowels loosed. She choked and cleared her throat again. "Colonel Young?"

Mann shook her head.

They cleared the rest of the house and found Young's naked body in the second bedroom. Newspapers had been taped over the windows. The afternoon sun glowed through them, coloring the room in a murky beige light.

Young was still zip-tied to a straight chair. Someone had dragged in a rolling toolbox, the kind usually found in garages, with drawers. A car battery and jumper cables sat on the floor next to it. Young's head lolled forward. Blood, dried and dark, covered his chest down to his groin, and had dripped down to the urine stained carpet under the chair.

The smell hit Ellie abruptly and she had to stagger back, out of the room, or contaminate the scene.


"Poor bastard," she heard Mann remark as she skirted through the living room, carefully not looking at the other dead man there, and out the front door.

It must have shown on her face. Tim started forward before Ellie could even say anything. "Are you okay?"

Davis looked concerned too, but his gaze moved past her to the house.

"Yes. Two suspects are down," Ellie said. "Gibbs wants Palmer here as soon as possible." She switched her attention to Davis. "Colonel Young is dead."

He pulled out his phone and walked far enough away they couldn't make out his low words.

"Gibbs wants me to wait for Palmer and you guys to join him inside," she finished.

Tim squeezed her shoulder as he headed inside. Davis gave her a sympathetic look and followed him. Ellie sucked in a deep breath, trying to fill her lungs with the smell of dry grass and clean air. The sun was warm on her cheeks. A bird squawked indignantly from the trees. One of her socks had a wrinkle in it, right under her heel. She was alive.

She dug out her phone and called Palmer. Then she sat down on the ground, took off her boot and fixed her sock.
Hollis Mann

Hollis wanted to curse, but she couldn't fault Gibbs for taking down the thug in the front room or Bishop for protecting herself and her partner. It just complicated the situation.

Louis Young hadn't been someone she knew personally. She worked out of DC mostly, digging up whatever the other guys didn't want Jack O'Neill to know about. It was satisfying; something new most days. As a civilian consultant she didn't have to kowtow to rank as much as during her CID days and O'Neill was a good boss. He gave his people their heads and backed them up, unless the planet was literally on the line.

That was something that had taken some time to settle in, working for Homeworld Security. Doing something that mattered more than national dick waving and climbing the career ladder.

She'd hoped that the fast work locating where Young was being held might mean finding him still alive. It was why she'd urged O'Neill to go along with keeping Gibbs on the case. DiNozzo and David might be gone but Gibbs' team was still one of the best out there and unhampered by politics. Yanking the case would have meant duplicating a lot of work NCIS had already done, pissing off Gibbs, and losing time.

O'Neill apparently knew Gibbs too. He'd agreed, given her Paul Davis as back-up and contact with the Program in Colorado and Nevada, and told her to do what she had to if they got a lead on who sold Young out.

They spent the rest of the afternoon sorting out the scene, getting the bodies, including Young's, back to the Navy Yard and Dr. Mallard's morgue, smoothing the local LEOs' ruffled feathers, and finally headed back to DC themselves.

McGee took the two baby investigators in his government sedan. Hollis rode with Gibbs, after cutting Paul loose with her car. He promised to leave it at her townhouse with the keys locked in the glove compartment. He'd take a taxi from there.

"Sorry about your man," Gibbs said during the drive back.

Hollis had skimmed Young's real file. Even with a lot of redactions, she knew he'd been a good officer. O'Neill would be the one writing a condolence letter to his wife. Paul would probably be the one who took her the news. It was shit all the way around.

"Will Dr. Palmer do the autopsy tonight?"

"Probably."

"I need to observe."

Autopsies weren't her favorite things, but it was necessary. If Goa'uld were involved, one of those bodies might still have a symbiote inside. Dead men tell no tales. But they did, to a pathologist as talented as Ducky Mallard. He'd find the signs, even if the snake had escaped, though he wouldn't know what they meant. She hoped Dr. Palmer was as talented and thorough as his mentor.
"Don't trust Palmer?" Gibbs kept it light, but she heard the tight anger in his voice.

"Dr. Mallard's reputation as a pathologist is the only reason Young's body is still in NCIS' hands," Hollis told him honestly. That, and the fact the single best pathologist the Stargate Program had employed had gone on the Atlantis Mission and, if Biro was still alive, she was still in Pegasus, gone unrepentantly native. "Now I find out he's in New York and someone else will be handling the autopsies."

"Better get something to eat then," Gibbs said, "you'll want to hang around until Palmer finishes up. Ducky trusted him to do his job."

Hollis told herself it was too late to bring in a different pathologist. Palmer would be at least as good as anyone else the Air Force could rope in.

They got take-out for the entire team, Indian instead of Thai after some debate. Bishop seemed to have recovered her equilibrium after shooting thug number two. She supposed it was a sign of getting old that Bishop looked like she should still be in high school to her. Hollis wanted to tell her to tie her hair back or braid it and dress like a field investigator and not a office analyst, but held her tongue. She typed up a quick preliminary report after they ate, emailed it to her office and Homeworld, and took a call from O'Neill, before following Gibbs down to the autopsy suite.

"Gibbs," Palmer greeted them, "and Colonel Mann. It's probably not acceptable to say it's nice to see you again when you're here because of a murder."

She considered correcting him but knew it would be futile. Palmer was a nervous babbler, but not stupid. Working with Gibbs must be hell on his nerves without Dr. Mallard to serve as a buffer.

Dr. Palmer was gowned up and Louis Young was laid out on the stainless-steel table, already past rigor mortis, sampled for forensic transfer and washed down. Palmer kicked on a digital recorder and camera with a foot switch and smiled at Hollis. She smiled back at him.

"Are you sure you wish to be present for the entire procedure?" he asked.

"I'm afraid it's necessary."

"Okay, you know what you're doing. You should both glove up and put on masks and eye protection. Splatter and bone dust can travel farther than you think."

She knew Gibbs didn't usually attend the autopsies. He trusted Ducky to provide him any useful information from them and preferred to keep moving on his investigations. Hollis found attending useful sometimes. She had always had an iron stomach, unlike many men she'd worked beside. She followed Palmer's instructions and glared until Gibbs did as well.

The autopsy went the way most of them did. Palmer worked smoothly but with an obvious respect for the battered body. He quietly narrated his every action and what it revealed to a digital recorder, pausing it to answer Gibbs questions periodically.

Hollis stayed quiet and out of the way, though closer to the table than Gibbs. She kept her hands in her pockets where she had a spray bottle of symbiont poison disguised as eau de cologne. The litany of what had been done to Young gave way to description of his internal organs, their state and weight, and Hollis tuned out when the bone saw began to hum, until Palmer hummed in interest at something.

"That's weird."
She saw Gibbs' interest pique too.

"See this burn on Colonel Young's forehead?" Palmer pointed to it. "I recorded it earlier during the superficial examination."

"So?" Gibbs was always impatient, but Palmer was too interested in Young to be bothered now. He pulled a lighted magnifying glass over the burn and peered at it. Gibbs snorted under his breath. "We already know he was tortured."

"Yes, but look at this. There is damage to the prefrontal cortex of the anterior frontal lobes, directly in line with the burn to the epidermis and the dermis that I already observed. I need to take a sample of the underlying bone there for further examination. Upon preliminary visual examination it appears almost cooked." Palmer sounded intrigued and looked up. His normally amiable face was bright with enthusiasm behind the shiny plexiglass face shield he wore. "It's like it's been microwaved!"

Hollis kept her expression placid. Palmer was as good as Ducky Mallard, though.

"That seems unlikely, Dr. Palmer," she told him.

"More things on heaven and earth," Palmer replied.

Hollis had to swallow a snort. If he only knew. Several Goa'uld interrogation tools did basically microwave flesh if applied too long. If someone had used one and been sloppy, they could have damaged Young's brain enough he couldn't give up anything. As a human being, Hollis couldn't wish that pain on anyone, but as an agent of Homeworld, she had to hope just that had happened.

"Your super-secret operation have any fancy doodads that could do that?" Gibbs asked.

"DARPA has experimented with microwave weapons, I believe," Hollis replied.

"Not what I asked."

She didn't want to get into another test of how long Gibbs could harass her while she stonewalled.

Young's brain was sitting on a scale. Palmer probed at the discolored portion, which seemed stiff and rubbery compared to the rest of the organ. Hollis eyed it with a pinch of sympathetic horror. Just because they'd killed Young didn't mean they hadn't put a Goa'uld in his head to rape every bit of knowledge from him before pulling it back out. The visible, unmistakable evidence of exterior interrogation might have been meant to divert attention from the more successful method.

Hollis hated having to think about things like that, but it was what O'Neill paid her to do. It was counter-intelligence, not criminal investigation, and that was why Gibbs hated it so much. If she figured out who was behind this, they were just as likely to leave them alone and feed them dezinformatsiya meant to poison enemy ops and reveal their entire network rather than arrest anyone.

"Dr. Palmer, is there any sign of trauma to the esophagus or the spine?" She didn’t bother asking about cuts to the mouth; most of Young's teeth had been pulled with pliers, obscuring any damage that might have been done by a Goa'uld's spiny fins.

"No, not that has shown up. You can call me Jimmy, you know. Anyway, is there some reason you would expect it? I can take another look."

"Just covering all the bases."
"Should I look for such trauma on the other two?"

Hollis glanced to where the two thugs waited their turns under the knife. "If you would, please." They'd acted like low-level low-lives when they'd realized they were about to be arrested, not Goa'uld, but she couldn't assume.

"No problem," Palmer agreed happily, despite her not offering any explanation. "You want to stick around for their posts too?"

"Yes."

Gibbs' eyebrows went up.

It was morning before the final autopsy was concluded and they went back upstairs. Either Gibbs' team had gone home at some point or they kept changes of clothes at the Navy Yard – which seemed likely – but they were at their desks. Bishop even had coffee for Gibbs and a tall tea for Hollis, along with a pastry.

"IDs on the suspects?" Gibbs asked.

"Robert 'Bobby' Gemmel and Johnny Norman," Torres said. He was bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and Hollis kind of wanted to slap the back of his head, if only for getting the sleep she hadn't.

Pictures on the plasma screen matched their two dead thugs.

"These two were local losers for hire. They acted as muscle for protection rackets and debt collectors of the more 'organized' elements but were not actually members of any gang. It looks like they were hired to grab Colonel Young and deliver him to the rental house." McGee dragged credit card records and still frames from CCTV onto the screen. "They boosted the Escalade for the job and spent yesterday morning tooling around in it, using Young's credit cards."

"Amateurs," Hollis said in disgust.

"Means they have no connection to the people really behind this, even if they're caught and talk," Gibbs pointed out.

She nodded because he was right.

"They never even saw the interrogators, I'd bet," Torres said.

"Sending them off with the credit cards was just another diversion tactic," Hollis agreed. "I want every fingerprint, stray hair, shoe scuff, and transfer from that house catalogued. Anything, anything, out of the ordinary, I want to know about it."

"Like what?" Gibbs waited with his 'do tell' face.

Hollis tossed her hands up. "I don't know? If I knew I'd tell you to look for that! Rare biologicals, bizarre chemicals or minerals, a tie-pin linked to a nefarious secret society, whatever magic Ms. Sciuto can use to turn into a lead."

Torres snort-laughed and Gibbs glared at him. "Whaaaat?" Torres protested.

"Go talk to Abby."

"Why did they come back?" McGee wondered of Norman and Gemmel.
"Second half of their pay, curiosity, maybe they were supposed to clean up and dispose of Young's body if we hadn't found them?" Bishop speculated.

"Doesn't matter. Find out everything you can about those two. Someone knows something about who hired them. They weren't in the yellow pages under 'thug'. There's always a connection."

"On it, boss," McGee said immediately.

Bishop picked up her phone and began work too, calling the local PD.

Hollis smoothed her hopelessly wrinkled skirt. "I'm going home to get a shower, Jethro, and catch some sleep before I go into my office."

"I'll call you a cab."

"Call me if anything breaks."

"Sure," he promised, and she knew he was lying. "You, too."

"Of course," she lied back.
"All right, Arkady, you're the one who sicced us on these people. Tell us what you picked up."

Arkady gave Callen a wounded look. "It isn't enough that I go out of my way to alert you to these people, now you want me to do your work for you?"

"Yes," Sam said.

Callen smiled at the Russian. "We just appreciate your perspicacity and want to take advantage of it."

Sam's dead-eyed look told him he would be hearing about perspicacity later.

Arkady preened a little, though, and sat back in his chair. Callen had to admit meeting pool-side in sunny LA, with chilled drinks and a fruit plate, beat the hell out of chasing Solntsevskaya bratva and rendezvousing in grimy bar back rooms and empty Moscow warehouses. He'd rather worry about sunstroke than frostbite.

"You've met with the four primaries?" Sam clarified. "Sato, Lindsay, Peters and Greene?"

"Yes." Arkady sipped his drink and gestured to the fruit plate. "They are… deceptive."

"You think they were lying to you?"

Callen picked up a piece of kiwi.

"Undoubtedly," Arkady confirmed, but then shrugged. "Their identities are false. Mio Sato is the equivalent of Jane Smith. The others are barely better. But that is not what I mean."

Callen stifled his impatience, sensing that Arkady wasn't playing a game this time but trying to nail down an impression in words. He wondered if it wouldn't be easier if they shifted the conversation into Russian. Sometimes nuances were difficult to convey.

"They are not operators," Arkady said slowly. "Not military."

"Not intelligence?" Sam asked.

"No," Arkady confirmed more confidently. "Intellectuals. Scientists."

"Okay." Callen tried the melon. Sam glared at him. What? It was good, and it was there. Not partaking would insult Arkady's hospitality. He ventured, "Something about them bugged you, though."

"Very intelligent but out of step," Arkady said. "Adept with technology, but ignorant of culture here. Like I am when I first arrive here in California." He snapped his fingers. "Out of date!"

Sam sighed loudly. "Geeks live in their own worlds."

"Geeks don't have hundreds of millions to spend," Callen pointed out mildly.
"Silicon Valley ones do," Sam pointed out. He was just playing Devil's advocate, though.

"Or carry guns and knives," Arkady added. "They were all… very aware. Looking for threats, in
the way of habit though, not specifically. It was incongruous."

Hypervigilant, Callen thought.

"They were carrying?" Sam finally sounded interested.

Arkady shrugged open-handed. "Did I search them?"

"And you took their job."

"Their money is good and there was nothing illegal. Background checks and vetting. It is not a
crime to act like you come from a war zone."

"But you called G," Sam said.

"Yes," Arkady agreed. "Mr. Greene made me curious."

"So, you looked into him." Callen smiled. _Once a spy…_ His smile faded. If they were smart
enough to hire Arkady to run backgrounds and sketchy enough to use false identities themselves,
then they would have expected Arkady to look at them too. But they might not know of the ex-
KGB officer's connection to Callen and American intelligence.

"What did you find out?"

Arkady's English slipped, losing the article, and his expression turned grim. "He is dead man." He
met Callen's gaze. "Your government says so."

"Give us what you have." Sam's patience hadn't been the same since Michelle.

Arkady plucked a flash drive from his pocket and slid it across the table Callen.

"Smart man," Arkady told them.

"Dangerous smart?" Sam asked.

Arkady shrugged again. "What do I know?"

Gibbs

Hollis and O'Neill showed up in the afternoon much to Gibbs' surprise. He'd expected the Air
Force and whatever black ops program O'Neill was masterminding would drop NCIS like a red-hot
hockey puck the minute they didn't need anything more from them.

Guess that meant the Air Force still needed something from them.

O'Neill headed up toward Vance's office. Hollis veered off toward the bullpen, looking put-
together and fresh, not like a woman who pulled an all-nighter and then likely spent her morning
briefing her boss.
"What's he doing here again?" he demanded.

"Don't be an ass," she replied. Up close he noted the tight lines around her mouth and eyes that make-up couldn't conceal. He'd caught a nap at home before coming back in to the Navy Yard. He doubted Hollis had gotten even that much.

Before he could reply, Abby clomped in at full speed on her platform-heeled boots, smiling, pigtails bouncing, exclaiming, "Gibbs, Gibbs, Gibbs!"

"What have you got for me?" he asked, trying not to smile too much. He'd never known why Abby had decided to adore him beyond that first, randomly delivered Caff-Pow, but it had certainly paid off. She was stranger than a fish trying to get a suntan, but she was brilliant and loyal.

"Gunshot residue on Johnny Norman's hands, his fingerprints on a 9mm Llama handgun recovered at the Blue Creek house rental yesterday, and the 9mm slug recovered from Commander Reinhart, which is a perfect ballistic match to Norman's gun," Abby announced.

"So, you have the answer to who shot Commander Reinhart. Case closed," Hollis said. "Hi, Abby."

"Hi, wow, it's been, like, ages, but you're back and kicking butt like old times," Abby greeted her. Hollis chuckled.

"Not like old times," Gibbs grumbled.

"Let's take this upstairs," Hollis suggested. "Our respective superiors will want to know this before they make any decisions."

Vance's dragon of a secretary wouldn't let Gibbs past until Hollis charmed her and then they were inside. O'Neill raised an eyebrow at Hollis.

Since she'd wanted to tell them, Gibbs let Hollis explain Abby's findings.

"That means the Reinhart case is finished," Vance stated.

"Not until we have whoever paid those two."

"That's our problem," O'Neill said. "We'll be arranging for Colonel Young's body to be sent home and continuing the investigation into his kidnapping and death."

"They could be helpful." Hollis didn't sound overly committed to the argument, but she'd made it.

"I'm not reading more people in when I'm busy trying to ride herd on the ones that already are in the know," Jack snapped, abruptly a tired, stressed, middle-aged man with the weight of the world on his shoulders and not the fake-cheery dimwit he'd been pretending to be with Vance. "Caldwell's due back in a week; that is if our friends 'over there' didn't add him to their collection."

"At least Young didn't know about that."

Gibbs opened his mouth to interrupt them, but Vance signaled him to stay quiet. He was leaning forward in his chair, watching Jack and Hollis intently. Gathering intelligence.

"Be nice if we knew what he did tell them."

"Or who 'they' is. He didn't have a hitchhiker and they didn't have long enough to squeeze him for everything," Hollis cocked her head thoughtfully. "But they did have access to at least some of the..."
old bad guy's stuff and used it."

Jack grunted. "Guess that rules out the religious element."

Hollis and Jack weren't going to give away anything useful and Gibbs' patience had hit its limits.

"Hey," he said, "you want to explain why a good officer got killed just to get to Young? What the hell did he know that's so important?"

"You aren't cleared for that," Jack said.

"Then get me clearance. Tell me what's really going on. Your man was there target. That means you have a leak!"

"You think I don't know that?" Jack replied wearily. His phone bleeped a sound that was almost an expletive and he jerked it out and answered with the sort of dire exhaustion Gibbs remembered from an unheated apartment in Poland, when Jack was his spotter while he watched through his scope as Sophia staggered in the snow, trying to run as the KGB closed in. He remembered Jack watching it through the binoculars as he said take the shot.

He never forgave Jack. He never forgave Hetty. Back in the wood-paneled offices with the leather club chairs Sophia was just another burned asset. She didn't know enough to hurt them. No one was going to trade for her. Blood on the snow, blood on everyone's hands.

"What?" Jack barked at the phone.

Gibbs listened, but couldn't pick up much; age and gunfire hadn't done his hearing any favors. Something something Daedalus something something two packages.

Jack's eyebrows shot up. "Two? Under our control?" He listened. "No. I have a rich fantasy life, Hank. Of course, we're taking the deal. We'll hem and haw and lie and offer them a bunch of beads and blankets, and we'll take the deal. Get the suites set up and try not to sulk where they can see you." He ended the call.

"Good news?" Hollis asked.

"No one started another war. These days I call that a win." His mind was already far away from Vance's office and the case he was taking away. "Mann, you have this. I've got to fly back and hold everyone's hands, so no one shits their pants and ruins this great no war streak we've got going."

"We're not done here," Gibbs said when Jack headed for the door.

"Gibbs!" Vance snapped. "You are done here. Commander Reinhart's murder case will be closed out. Everything else belongs to Homeland and the Air Force." He switched his attention to Jack. "General, you and Ms. Mann know the way out."

Jack and Hollis left. Gibbs knew in his bones he wouldn't see either of them again unless something blew up so ugly and public that ZNN plastered it all over the news. Maybe Jack would fuck up and start another war. But that wasn't Jack. Take the shot. Jack would do whatever he had to do and leave the snow stained red.

He spared a glare for Vance and stomped his own way downstairs and out for coffee and a Caff-Pow for Abby.

He did reach out and call in a few favors over the next few days, trying to find a crack he could use
to pry out the truth, but he kept his team out of it. All he got was cover story: after his son died and his divorce, Jack had been running black ops, then he 'retired' briefly, before being assigned Cheyenne Mountain and a deep space telemetry project.

Batshit Jack knew about as much about deep space anything as a ground squirrel knew about the general relativity theory. It was cover, but no one was willing to talk about what was really going on at the Mountain.

His best hope of finding out anything more called him back and told him to stay away or leave him out of whatever crusade he was on this time.

"Cheyenne Mountain is a meat grinder and O'Neill's the one who feeds the hopper," the man said over bourbon flavored with nail rust and sawdust. He gulped down the last of it and headed for the stairs. "Keep clear, Jethro. Too many people have already disappeared down that hole."

Hetty

Owen contemplated the surveillance photos on display and Hetty contemplated Owen. Finally, he faced her and gave her a sardonic look. Since the NID took custody of Jennifer Kim, tension had run high between them. Owen knew Hetty knew something he didn't, but he wasn't willing to ask any questions he thought she'd answer. Hetty stared back, unwilling to engage.

"What do you think?" he asked. "Put someone in undercover?"

On what excuse? She wanted to ask. Making money, spending it, and not having drawn the attention of law enforcement previously weren't crimes yet. For all that she agreed QE, Unlimited was more than it seemed – and what it seemed was enigmatic enough – to rate their interest, the bean counters in Budget would want something more concrete. Despite Arkady's identification, they had no proof R.P. Greene was in fact Radek Zelenka.

The photographs showed the four owners of QE, two women and two men. Mio Sato, Jane Lindsay, Gordon Peters, and R.P. Greene, who Hetty privately agreed was Zelenka. They ranged from late thirties to possibly late forties and were all unremarkable in appearance. They did not look like operators, though they maintained cyber security that had thwarted both Mr. Beale and Miss Jones along with remarkable forensic discipline. They left no garbage to be analyzed, no fingerprint, and jammed both audio and digital video surveillance. The photographs presently displayed had been obtained with a film camera from Hetty's own collection.

Hetty considered the screen displays again. "I believe we would find that much more difficult than one would initially believe." Whoever they really were and whatever their genuine purposes, everyone working for QE was cautious and capable. They were on the lookout for either corporate or national espionage efforts at penetrating their business.

"I'm sure Kolcheck would be willing to slip Callen or Hanna in," Owen suggested. "He's still vetting people for them."

"QE provided all the names they wanted Arkady to vet." Hetty narrowed her eyes as she considered the implications. According to Arkady, they'd begun with a single, short list, then provided a longer one, with additional names being appended periodically. Perhaps as they conducted their own interviews with the people who passed the background check they were offered the names of
others who would fit with QE?

They were using academic networking rather than a headhunting operation. Subtle. She wanted to study those lists again.

"We could send Callen or Hanna in under one of those names. At least some of them have been ex-military. A couple of them are flat out mercenaries."

"Much too likely to blow up in our faces," Hetty said. She pursed her lips. At least some of the ex-military and law enforcement people QE had hired early on were acting as their security now, replacing or augmenting the security contractors they'd initially hired.

"They're acquiring materials, chemicals, and equipment with no stated business plan or end use," Granger pointed out. "They're looking for and hiring scientists."

"Yes, well, they've also recruited several agricultural specialists, biologists and botanists," Hetty pointed out. "That doesn't fit the profile of a terrorist or national intelligence operation. Perhaps they really are a venture NGO." Their corporate non-disclosure agreements were air-tight even regarding their interviews. Everyone they'd hired post interview had received signing bonuses large enough to handle closing their lives where they currently lived. Jobs were quit, debts were paid off, leases broken, cars either sold or even given away and then, between one day and the next, QE's new hires, along with their belongings and even their pets, vanished.

Hetty didn't like it. She didn't like it at all.

Granger hmphed. Arkady had brought QE to their attention. If that old KGB operator thought there was something more to the company, Hetty knew better than to dismiss him.

QE had sprung out of nothing and nowhere, it seemed, and one of its directors was a man who had been declared dead over three years before. The official death certificate claimed he'd died of injuries incurred in a car accident in Colorado.

The new identity had not been manufactured by an intelligence apparatus. They'd never have provided an alias with a connection to his name. What they would have done was backstop the new identity, something that no one had bothered to do for him or his three companions. Like Athena, they had sprung fully formed into the world.

Hetty wondered who they really were and why they had created and were running an international company with enigmatic aims and unknown sources of extraordinary capitol.

The money trail led back through off-shore banks, shell corporations, and false-front businesses. It disappeared in a cats' cradle of transactions in Panama and Aruba amid whispers of gold, platinum, and diamonds. QE also had quietly sold new, advanced microchip designs to GlobalFoundries for a sum that raised her eyebrows. But who had created the designs, where had the work had been done and how remained a quiet mystery.

Mr. Beale had one of the purchase orders NCIS had intercepted open in front of him.

"You know," he said, "if it weren't for the farmers and actual stuff like seed stock they've bought, I'd think they were going to construct their own fab."

"Their own what?" Owen demanded.

"Fab. Fabrication plant for making microchips," Mr. Beale explained. "Like Intel, Samsung, GlobalFoundries, and, uh, the other one."
"TSMC," Miss Jones supplied. "Those are the four largest suppliers of microchips in the world."
She frowned at the screen, brows drawn together beneath her straight bangs. "I don't think this company has the capitol to build a fab on their scale, even with the amounts we've managed to document."

"Maybe not, but who says they want to make enough to market to the whole world?" Mr. Beale was becoming more enthusiastic. "Look, they obviously have a very advanced R & D lab somewhere. That design didn't come out of nowhere. Maybe they sold to leverage enough money to build a facility to make something even more advanced. Something revolutionary."

"Interesting theory," Owen said. Hetty could see him dismissing it. It might be exciting for the computer geeks, but if it wasn't a crime and it wasn't a threat to US national interests, it didn't rate the OSP's interest in Owen's opinion. Hetty believed in taking the long view. Revolutionary technology, like classified technology, could be very detrimental to US interests if it fell into the wrong hands.

Whether QE was antithetical or not, it was a mystery she wanted plumbed.

"Scientists and mercenaries almost makes sense," Miss Jones opined, "but where do the farmers and botanists fit in? They interviewed three people who raise goats last week."

Owen nodded though. "Vertically integrated drug manufacture possibly. Plants, farming, compounding facilities, pharmacists, they all fit."

"So, QE is really a drug cartel?" Mr. Beale exclaimed.

"Not, I think, in the sense of an illegal one," Hetty said. "But you and Owen may both be onto something."

Miss Jones was watching her. Hetty held back a smile. Of all her proteges, Miss Jones showed the most promise. She paid attention to the small things along with the obvious. She had the knack of soft power, too: she knew how to make people want to do what she wanted rather than using force or authority.

Hetty nodded to herself. "We should dedicate more eyes-on surveillance to QE's warehouses and learn where the materials they're purchasing ultimately go. Follow the bulldozers and other large equipment."

A great deal of material had gone into that warehouse complex and nothing had yet come out. A perplexing list of items that Hetty hadn't been able to parse. Industrial sewing machines. Looms. Cloth. Chemicals. Carpenter tools. Construction machinery. Construction materials: steel beams, rebar, cement, sealants, electrical and plumbing supplies. Kilns. Agricultural tools and supplies. Medical supplies, anything with a shelf life beyond a week or two, they were acquiring hospitals' worth of it.

She'd begun to wonder how it was all fitting into the vast industrial complex of warehouses QE had purchased outright.

Maybe QE was a proprietary operation of Jack's, something set up to generate off-budget funds and purchase items without GAO overview. If so, it would be best to watch and not interfere. The less said, the better. She didn't fool herself that Jack would let her know. A secret was a secret only so long as only one person knew it. The west coast was Hetty's domain, but QE was international in scope. Certainly, it was in its hiring practices.
She'd mention Quindozum Enterprises discreetly the next time she was in DC, unless Jack showed up on her doorstep first. If he didn't blink, it would be enough to point him at them.
Chapter 5

Vala

Eventually, Caldwell convinced whoever was in charge at the SGC to talk to them. First it was a
general - not O'Neill - who Vala dubbed Brushy Eyebrows, but he didn't have the authority to
negotiate. Eventually, after another day, it was a woman named Elizabeth Weir and O'Neill, telling
Vala that as a representative of Pegasus, the IOA would negotiate with her.

They invited her to stay at Stargate Command.

"Locked up like rabid dogs," Mer described it. "They're going to treat you like a retarded cousin,
because they're convinced they're smarter and more advanced than anyone else."

"Don't say retard," Jehan admonished Mer. Mer grumbled and mumbled at 'politically correct
mealy-mouthed censors', then sighed. "Fine. They'll treat you like a mushroom, kept in the dark
and fed shit."

"You're serious?" Vala asked. "Do they understand that I was a host to a Goa'uld?"

"Don't try to comprehend how politicians think," Jehan advised. They were all in Vala's cabin
while she debated over what to take with her planet-side. Jehan was lounging on her bed, though he
kept his boots on the deck. Mer was pacing and getting in her way.

Vala held up a silver gown that was more cutaway than fabric. It went with a box full of diamond-
encrusted platinum jewelry. A snotty family of refugees from a world with a name she'd already
forgotten had thought they could trade it and some other pieces and make themselves aristocrats in
Atlantis. One of the younger sons wasn't utterly stupid, though, and Vala had accepted the jewelry
as a crew share buy-in since he had no pre-existing skills. Serving on one of Atlantis' ships earned
him a citizenship and let the rest of his family live in the city. But Atlantis didn't have royalty and
since they had no skills they were on mop and scrub duty.

"What do you think?" she asked with a shake of the gown. The fabric appeared to be pouring from
her fingers.

"Really Goa'uld," Jehan said.

Vala grimaced. It really was. She'd look incredible in it, of course. But she'd picked it up in case
she needed to fake being Qetesh. She doubted playing the Goa'uld or even the ex-Goa'uld card
would play well on Earth.

"Eh," Mer said, "it's better than a lot of the stuff on the Paris catwalks."

"How would you know?" Jehan asked, turning his head to look at Mer.

Mer looked unsettled. "There were magazines. In the house." He swallowed. "When I was married
to Sam."

Jehan lifted his eyebrows. "Doesn't sound like Sam."

Mer shrugged. "I think her sister-in-law subscribed to them for her. They had a very passive-
aggressive thing."

"Doesn't explain why you know what was in them."

"You know I'll read anything if I'm desperate enough. Sam left them in the bathroom."

"Maybe Zelenka can pick up some new issues for you while we're on Earth," Jehan teased.

"Jackass." Mer looked at the dress Vala was about to toss in the no-go pile. "Take it. Wear it. It'll remind the IOA that they can't push you around like they do the SGC."

"Are you sure?" Considering the Tau'ri were the ones who had done more damage to the Goa'uld, breaking the power of the System Lords, reminding them of one seemed a less than rewarding plan.

"Mmm. They're going to freak out anyway. Own it."

Jehan stretched on the bed, wriggling his shoulders into the mattress. "Mer's right. The only way to do this is get right into their faces."

They were speaking English. Vala picked it up from Jehan and expanded her vocabulary and fluency with Mer and many of the expedition members. The gate translator let her understand most of it, but a phrase like that would have puzzled her without native speakers to give it context. She thought how odd the expression would sound in Goa'uld or any of the Jaffa dialects.

English was ridiculous. Its complexity made it easy to play games with its multiple levels of meaning. She loved innuendo and sarcasm. Goa'uld had little use for nuance. The flowery sort of sycophancy the Goa'uld demanded sounded fake in English even if it was said truly.

She knew Jehan didn't want to be here, on Earth. Returning to the Via Stella didn't bother him. But his home planet, where she suspected he had family, and the Tau'ri military that had abandoned him had him uneasy, unsure of himself and his place.

O'Neill swore the Tau'ri authorities had believed John Sheppard was dead. The sholva swore on his honor that he had believed so and told them so. How much honor could a sholva have, though?

Vala shook herself. He had more than the Goa'uld had. Teal'c had betrayed his 'god' and seen the Goa'uld torn down. If the prim'ta in his gut didn't make her skin crawl she might even like him.

Jehan didn't want to come back to Earth, but he would still be ringing down to the SGC with her and Mer and the rest of their small diplomatic party, because his knowledge of the Tau'ri and their military and politics would be invaluable. Ronon and Teyla would round out the initial party. Ronon was included as security, and Teyla because as Ambassador Emmagan she represented all of Atlantis and for the purposes of these negotiations, Pegasus.

Teyla laughed so hard she snorted when everyone agreed she would lead, but she was a natural for it. She led the Athosians, ran trade missions, and was basically a diplomat well known throughout the Pegasus worlds before she ended up as a runner. She was harder and more ruthless and most loyal to Jehan and the Revenge now, but she still had all her skills.

She was going to eat the Tau'ri for breakfast.

And if they gave them enough trouble, there was always the raiding option. What had Jehan called it?
They could be Space Vikings.

Mer had choked on his coffee, while pointing a finger at Jehan and finally snarling, "There will be no Fuzzies. Oh my God. H. Beam Piper."

Vala assumed it was some Tau'ri thing. She didn't want to know. They had so many little in-jokes and cultural touchstones, it was insane.

Jehan had grinned for hours.

Mer knew how smart Vala was. Not the smart Mer was, but like Jehan, she had a brain that worked in different ways than his did. They both could keep up with him if he explained things piece by piece. Jehan could sometimes follow the jumps Mer's mind made, once he knew where Mer had landed. Metaphorically. Vala's talent, among many, lay in the cheerful manipulation of human beings.

He knew Vala could handle the IOA.

He hadn't anticipated just how Teyla outclassed them all. Appointing her Ambassador had been inspired.

Jehan was as silent as Ronon. They were all, except Teyla, wearing the version of a uniform which Vala, Sam and Haemi had designed with contributions from Bates, of all people. Turned out Eugene not only knew how to sew, but to tailor, and had strong and useful opinions on how to create something that would look 'strack' and still provide both protection and ease of movement in a combat situation.

The uniform was mostly black and mostly leather along with a ribbed Satedan fabric that dispersed impacts better than Kevlar. There were buckles made from a bronze-colored alloy in what Mer thought were slightly ridiculous numbers, but they hid several secret pockets. After multiple arguments Vala had forgone the skull-and-crossbones that graced Revenge's hull, and their shoulders held a patch with a stylized, bloodred dagger over the silver snowflake outline of Atlantis' piers.

Mer had to admit they all looked awesome in uniform.

As Ambassador, Teyla dressed in bronze and copper silks; a heavy ornately-embroidered open coat over a tunic, trousers, and boots. The coat was lined with Satedan body armor.

Too bad they were buried under Cheyenne Mountain, spending their days in windowless conference rooms punctuated by 'escorted' trips to the mess hall, and their nights in the SGC's diplomatic suites. Suites which were only one step up from the BOQ, in that the awful mattresses were for beds rather than bunks. If Jolinar hadn't fixed his back, he would have been half crippled after the last week.

"Tell me," Teyla said with a sweet smile, "exactly what you believe you gain by treating us in this fashion?"

"What fashion?" the German IOA representative replied. The way his lips thinned and his eyelid
twitched gave away that he knew exactly what Teyla meant.

"As threats to your world," Teyla said. "You keep us here, under guard in a military facility." Her tone grew harder. "If not as threats, then perhaps as prisoners, not allowed even to stray from the 'quarters' you so generously have provided after your curfew."

"It's best, for everyone's safety."

"You are threats," Shen said after Germany fumbled it. She was the smartest of the IOA people, crippled only by her political ambitions and whatever orders she had from the Chinese government.

Vala had kicked back her chair so she could cross one leg over the other and kick her booted foot. The kicks slowed down, into something more like the slow lash of a cat's tail before a pounce.

"We could be," Vala said while staring straight at Shen, "if you want to play it that way."

Someone on the other side of the table sucked in a loud breath.

"Let me be clear," Teyla said and the steel under the pretty silk started to slice through, "I am not a naïve child. I do not believe technology is magic or the work of gods. I understand your International Oversight Agency encompasses only a few of your planet's nations and that the Stargate Program is primarily a tool of what your world refers to as either the First World or the West." She swept her gaze past Weir, who had opened her mouth but said nothing, to Shen again. "Even your China seeks to accrue power over the rest of your planet through what you gain through trade in technology."

Shen returned a look just as steely. Mer had to admit Shen had bigger balls than all the men in the room.

"You have been insulting me, my companions and all of the people of Pegasus since our arrival."

"You must understand, our actions impact our entire world," Weir said. "We have to take precautions."

"Mer," Vala remarked, "what's that phrase the Atlantis marines use?"

"Bullshit?"

"No, it's a colloquialism."

He shrugged. Jehan coughed.

"Oh!" Vala smiled brightly. "I remember!"

Mer braced himself.

"Don't piss on me and tell me it's raining."

Ronon snorted, the sound he made to hide laughter. Everyone on the other side of the conference table stiffened. Weir flushed.

"Indeed," Teyla agreed. "My own people have a similar saying. We know you would not treat a diplomatic envoy from one of your great nations in the manner you have ours."

"What you know is irrelevant," Germany snapped. "We can't allow aliens and – he sneered at Mer, "traitors to wander around loose."
"You can bend over and spread your legs when they have something that could save your asses from the Ori or the Wraith, though," Mer said.

"Meredith," Teyla chided.

"Politicians are all whores," he said in Goa'uld.

The corner of Jehan's mouth quirked up while Vala let out a peal of laughter.

"How dare you, you –"

"Enough," Weir interrupted Germany. "Perhaps we should suspend this meeting for the day and return to it tomorrow when we might accomplish something."

"We're not going to accomplish anything while you keep making demands you haven't got a chance of enforcing," Mer said. "Ugh. I want coffee. And not that hideous swill you serve in the mess. That's an insult to the water you make it with."

He watched Weir take in a deep breath and close her eyes longer than a normal blink. She was probably counting silently to keep from screaming and shoving a pen through someone's eye.

"We can send out for something," she said when she exhaled.

"Oh, don't bother," Vala said. She tapped the modified radio headset masquerading as fancy earrings and added, "Well get it ourselves. – Signe. Beam Jehan and Meredith up please. They'll tell you where they want to go once they're on-board."

Mer sneered at Germany and Shen as he left his seat.

"Get me something with chocolate!" Vala called as the Asgard beam enveloped them. On Revenge, Jehan put on a green button-up and Mer opened his own jacket to show the Iron Man graphic T-shirt underneath. They kept the leather pants. They hooked their radio communicators around their ears and could pass as a couple of upscale bikers.


"Starbucks, really? There's so much better coffee out there," Mer whined.

The Asgard beam dissolved them and reintegrated them down in an empty alley behind one of the ubiquitous coffee houses. They walked around the front to go in, with Jehan digging a wallet out of his jacket. They had IDs and cash, debit, and credit cards thanks to the work Radek, Lindsay, Miko and Peter had already done. *Aurora* had arrived, cloaked and unnoticed by anyone on Earth, well before *Revenge* followed *Daedalus* back to Sol. Their op would remain clandestine, while the IOA and SGC were focused on the official Pegasus delegation.

*Tempestas* was currently raiding Praxyon and would arrive soon. They’d decided if one of their ships was going to be shot up, it might as well be the one they were considering trading.

Teyla, Vala, and everyone with *Revenge* were here mostly as a diversion. Radek had a head for covert ops and accomplishing any number of things under government radar. Lindsay, Miko and Peter were all au courant enough to blend in. With *Aurora’s* processing power and the hacking algorithms Mer and Radek and the other programmers from the expedition had put together, they could slide through any connected information network on the planet.

Just because they were a diversion didn't mean they had to put up with being jerked around by the
IOA, though.

Thus, the coffee run.

Teyla didn't like coffee, so they debated and got her a bubble tea, and a caramel macchiato for Ronon. He would happily drink anything with caramel. They ordered peppermint hot chocolate for Vala. Being purists, or in Jehan's case a military heathen, he and Mer got theirs black. They picked up pastries too, including some for the bridge crew, and took their carriers and bags back to the alley.

Then they were up to the ship again, handing over goods to the bridge crew, then zapped back down to the conference room deep under Cheyenne Mountain. The one that was supposed to be beyond the reach of Asgard beams or Goa'uld rings. It would have been if Mer hadn't tucked a location beacon under his chair before they left.

Germany and Great Britain were both on their feet when the brightness of the beam faded. Shen had her stone-face on. Weir had gone pale, because of all of them she was the smartest and had already put together the implication of the green mermaid logo on the cups Mer and Jehan passed around.

Vala made a happy noise as she inhaled over her cup. "Perfect."

Teyla smiled at the bubble tea, while Ronon slurped his macchiato.

"That – " Germany started and then ran out of words.

"That," Vala agreed.

"There's a shield," he said. He swung his attention to Weir. "The shield is in place, yes?"

"Yes," she replied tiredly.

"It is," Mer agreed. "We understand how it works. We punch through Goa'uld and Wraith shielding and after the Asgard visited, I figured out how to get through theirs as well."

"The Ori penetrated our ship's shielding," the Russian representative spoke for the first time. "They destroyed Korolev. Only a few from our crew were ringed away by the Tok'ra before their ship retreated."

"The Tok'ra are great at retreating," Mer muttered. He was surprised they'd gotten close enough to the fighting to rescue anyone. They were masters at cutting their losses.

Some people might say he was biased. He said he had inside knowledge.

"You're missing the point, anyway," Vala said. She sipped her chocolate, then held up the cup, turning it ostentatiously.

"And that is?" Weir asked, poised and calm and careful, because she already understood it. This was for the rest of the IOA.

Maybe not the Russian. He'd been quiet all along, listening to his confederates, and watching all the Pegasus delegation thoughtfully. Mer narrowed his eyes. How had he been introduced?

Shit, that was General Chekov. He'd been in command of Korolev according to the reports they'd hacked from the Daedalus' servers. Promoted to General when he'd made it back. No wonder he'd
fixated on the shields.

"We could take our existence and our presence here to your United Nations," Teyla explained. "We were originally inclined to do so, since we came to negotiate with Earth as a planet, not your few privileged nations."

"But our nations are in charge of the stargate," Chapman said.

"Big deal," Vala replied.

"The Ring of the Ancestors is irrelevant to trade between galaxies, Mr. Chapman," Teyla pointed out. "We have ships, just as you do. And it is the ships, along with Atlantean technology and any weapons you might obtain from us, that interest you."

"Of course," LaPierre said.

Teyla inclined her head, not so much it was a bow, but an acknowledgement.

"It was decided it would be faster and easier to negotiate with you, because you are already aware of these matters," Teyla said, "but if you insist on treating us like prisoners and enemies, it is a simple matter for us land Revenge outside Canberra or Johannesburg or Dubai. Perhaps Buenos Aires or Lima or Mexico City or Singapore. I do not believe you could 'hush' that up."

"We could make them," Germany snarled.

"Strom!" Weir snapped at him.

"If we did business with a country, they would be our ally," Teyla said.

"Do you really want to know how Revenge could measure up in a fight with your military?" Vala asked. "Along with Tempestas? Which should be arriving tomorrow."

"I suspect all those countries that haven't been invited into your organization would be happy to unite against it, given the prospect of advanced technology and allies against the enemies whose interest you have drawn to Earth," Teyla finished.

"You have the gall to threaten us?" Strom demanded.

"Facts are facts," Mer stated. "You can't make them go away by puffing your chest like a pouter pigeon."

"Earth isn't ready for Disclosure," Weir said.

Vala shrugged. "Guess you better play ball then."

Ronon finished his macchiato, crumpled the cup, and lofted it carelessly to drop in the garbage can in the corner.

"Nothing but net!" Vala congratulated him. Basketball, as played by marines, had caught on in Atlantis. Impromptu games were played in the 302 bays on Revenge as well.

Shen curled her lip.

Weir folded her hands over each other on the table. "Very well. What are your demands?"

"Requests, please," Teyla said. "We come to you as equals, with great admiration for your triumphs
over your Goa'uld enemies, and in the hope of friendship and cooperation between us."

Teyla continued seriously. "We have come very far, very fast. But not far enough to forget that your world sent the Atlantis Expedition to our galaxy to steal it from us, with no care to any damage you did consequently. I have read a great deal of your histories thanks to the libraries aboard Revenge and brought by the Expedition members themselves. Pegasus will not play the part of the New World to Tau'ri Imperialism."

"Of course," Weir said. "We have learned a great deal since the times you were reading about."

"Yeah, I don't think so," Mer muttered.

"Meredith," Teyla murmured and touched his forearm lightly.

Jehan coughed, probably as a distraction. He'd been deliberately silent in the presence of anyone who wasn't crew. There was no pretending Meredith hadn't been born on Earth or hiding his history with the SGC and the Tok'ra. But O'Neill obviously hadn't reported his suspicions about who Jehan was. That let them keep him as a dark horse, someone the Tau'ri might talk in front of, not realizing he would understand the nuances and cultural specifics that an outsider wouldn't.

His presence was comfort to Meredith too: a reminder that he wasn't alone in his exile, that they hadn't just betrayed him, these people in this place that had hated him. Jehan understood more than anyone else ever could.

"Now," Teyla said, "shall we begin again?"
"You told me they were smart," Elizabeth said ruefully.

"And you thought I just meant Sam and Rodney," Jack replied just as ruefully.

"My bad."

"So, now you’re down to the brass tacks." The Pegasus delegation's Ancient warship had dropped out of hyperspace, running dark, and established an orbit beyond Jupiter neatly plotted to avoid anyone noticing it that wasn't looking for it. *Tempestas*, they called it. The SGC and the IOA wanted it very badly.

Elizabeth was a little more cautious. She wanted to know why the Pegasans were willing to part with such a prize. The possibilities reduced to two. Either *Tempestas* was a lemon, or the Pegasans had enough ships they could afford to give up one.

She found herself grimly hoping for the latter. It meant having to make nice, but they'd done worse – supplied hosts – for the Tok'ra. The Pegasans would be better allies, even if they had their own war to fight. She couldn't imagine Vala Mal Doran bowing to the Ori. That woman didn't respect anything except money and fire power.

"Do we still have a planet?" Jack asked lightly.

"Yes." Elizabeth knew she sounded tart, but really? Negotiations and diplomacy were her wheelhouse. Ambassador Emmagan was just alien enough to keep her on her toes, but the woman was intelligent, practical, and once she had the IOA convinced they couldn't jerk her people around, cooperative. Elizabeth had dealt with far worse; egomaniacs so insecure they had to use their power even when it made matters worse for them, and greedy politicians so intent on gathering power they were blind to the harm they were doing. Or the ones who weren't blind and didn't care.

Oh, the IOA had gnashed its teeth, but the Pegasans didn't really want anything extraordinary. Some refined ores that were rare or difficult to mine, medical supplies and equipment enough to equip a modern hospital, manufactured goods like cloth, tools, replacement parts for some of the equipment the Expedition had taken with them. Delicacies the Tau'ri among them missed; plants, seeds, cuttings, and whatever it took to run greenhouses. Libraries worth of books, digital and paper, movies, and music.

Ammunition and small arms; that request was still a stumbling block. The IOA did not want to trade weapons.

Vala Mal Doran had laughed like a crow at that. "You want us to turn over a Goa'uld-damned warship, but don't want to trade a few bullets and missiles. Puling, pox-tongued pissbabies."

Elizabeth had to cover her mouth at that. It was clear Mal Doran had picked up a lot of insults from the Expedition marines, enough that she didn't need to resort to Goa'uld to make her opinions clear. But occasionally, they came out just a little odd.
The munitions were going to take longer, but the deal would go through. Elizabeth didn't even feel badly over it: the weapons would be used on the Wraith in Pegasus. She might not trust Mal Doran not to deal arms to factions in Pegasus or the Milky Way, but Ambassador Emmagan radiated integrity. Elizabeth knew her word would be good, and despite being a rogue otherwise, Mal Doran acknowledged Emmagan's authority without resentment.

"Well, that's good," Jack commented. She could hear the humor in his voice and imagine the way it sharpened his brown eyes. Age was having its inevitable way with Jack, but only a fool would think he was less dangerous now than in his youth. "What are we giving up?"

"That's why I called you."

Jack groaned, and Elizabeth smiled.

"The IOA will be providing the Pegasus delegation with special United Nations identification," she explained. "The delegation intends on establishing a consulate in New York along with an embassy in DC. They've agreed to accept a security escort rather than using their own, in the interests of discretion."

"An embassy?" Jack squeaked. "You're serious?"

"Very."

"And they want the security escort, so they can…?"

"They don't but agreed after Dr. McKay brought up the possibilities of Trust agents or even common criminals."

"But why do they need to be somewhere besides the Mountain?" Jack whined.

"Ambassador Emmagan expressed an interest in exploring our various cultures," Elizabeth said primly.

"Yeah, sure."

"Plus, she wants to remind us that we have to treat them with the same respect we would a delegation from an Earth nation, not lock them up under a mountain."

Jack sighed audibly. "I get it. Don't like it, but I get it."

"In a fashion, the Pegasans are more sophisticated than our other allies," Elizabeth admitted.

"Seems weird to think that about the Tok'ra or the Tollan or the Nox."

"Sophisticated and advanced aren't necessarily the same."

"So, the Expedition folks have clued them in and they want to do some shopping and touristy shit while they're here?"

"Something like that," Elizabeth agreed.

"And this involves me, how?"

"I would appreciate if Homeworld provided security and vetted anyone the delegation hires, along with providing a liaison."
"A liaison," Jack said wearily.

"Who will spy on them for us, of course," Elizabeth joked.

"You goddamn betcha." He paused before asking with a frown in his voice, "Who is paying for everything? Am I going to have bury this in my budget?"

Elizabeth finally laughed.

"Don't worry about that, Jack. They traded us a prototype Ancient generator that can run a city the size of New York for six months between refueling and enough diamonds and gold to buy a small country. The Russians and Chinese were kind enough to turn them into funds that the delegation can access without raising any questions."

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**Jack**

He dug out his Asgard bug zapper and started turning it on and off randomly while he discussed the nuts and bolts of the Pegasus delegation's travel plans. They'd been convinced to at least fake using normal travel methods. They'd beam up to their ship and then down to a plane after it made the journey, so they could go through customs and get those handy UN passports stamped that they'd entered the countries legally.

Because, of course, they wanted to poke around Europe and every other damn continent.

Once he'd established enough outages that it would pass for an equipment failure, he turned the zapper on and left it. By now all the snoops were used to their bugs cutting out at his office. He used the zapper at arbitrary times and not just when he wanted some privacy; he even turned it on sometimes and left it on when he was elsewhere. Thor had been kind enough to come up with one that worked on communications as well as immediate surroundings, and Jack didn't have a frigging clue how that worked, but it was useful for talking on the phone or radio.

"So, this is going to be handy," he interrupted Elizabeth. "Also, kind of a shitshow."

"What do you mean?" she asked cautiously.

"This line is Asgard secured for the moment. No one, not SGC, NID, CIA, NSA, Russians, Chinese or even the Pegasus folks can eavesdrop thanks to Thor."

"I just know you're going to say something I don't want to hear."

"Bzzt!"

"All right, go ahead, ruin my day."

"We've got a mole."

Elizabeth was silent for a long moment. Finally, she asked, "A mole or a leak?"

Jack pulled out his favorite yoyo and began playing with it. "I'm going with mole."

"And that's enough to ruin my day, but I feel like you're going go ahead and ruin my week too."
"Aw, Lizzy," Jack teased. Sometimes, he really did like her.

"Go ahead, Jack, I'd like to get a drink after this. It's important to hydrate before you cry in your pillow all night."

"I'm going to use the Pegasus delegation as bait to flush the bastard out."

"You owe me so many drinks. You can't think this is a good idea? If something happens to one of the delegation it could throw the entire alliance in the garbage. No, worse, it could result in them attacking Earth. Jack, they have two warships in our solar system!"

"So do we," he offered. He lost control of the yoyo though and it slumped to the end of its string.

"They know how to go through our shields, just like the Ori. You're the military man, you know what happened at P3Y-229!"

"You really think they'd get in a shooting war with us?" It wasn't how he'd read the Atlantis people. But it wasn't Sam in charge. Emmagan was steady though, he thought, and Mal Doran preferred profit to slaughter. McKay would probably put in a good word; he might despise the SGC, but he had a sister and a niece. He'd at least understand how things could go sideways. Jehan, well, he probably didn't want Earth destroyed; he hadn't even wanted Teal'c dead once he’d accepted Teal'c wasn't in Goa'uld service any longer.

"It would probably take more than an accident or even an assassination, but they might change their minds about the warship."

"And we could really use an Ancient warship, not to mention everything we could learn from it and add to our ships," Jack said. He got it. He did. But the threat of a mole, whether in the SGC itself or Homeworld, was too serious to ignore. Hell, if the mole was in the right position, they could sell out Earth and the Ancient warship could end up in Lucian hands.

The Pegasus delegation made perfect bait. The mole wouldn't be able to resist sending information on it through and Jack would be waiting to pounce. He might have blown Gibbs and NCIS off, but he felt as strongly about Louis Young and Alan Reinhart as they did. Keeping the program secret and safeguarding Earth came even before justice, but that didn't mean he wouldn't get it for them eventually.

"You're sure," Elizabeth said, not as a question though. "The CIA vetted the NID and the SGC thoroughly after the last…"

"Fiasco? Sure, they did. Of course, that's assuming the CIA investigators were clean." Jack slouched in his desk chair. He had a dinner with Admiral Holliday and his wife scheduled for his evening. He wasn't looking forward to that; it wasn't going to be pot roast and potatoes and a hockey game afterwards. Holliday was angling for Secretary of Navy and kissing ass from the Norfolk to the Potomac. Dinner would be wall to wall bigwigs, big brass, and blowhards, but Jack had to play the game too. Few people in DC knew what he did, but they all knew he had pull with the President, and that either made him interesting or dangerous to ambitious people like Holliday.

"Maybe they were," he went on, "but that's no guarantee they still are."

"Okay. Just, try to play it safe as possible."

"You betcha."

He shut the zapper off and on repeatedly as he mentioned his dinner plans and closed out the
conversation with Elizabeth.

His mind drifted to the question of how compromised Area 51 might be after Young's capture and interrogation. Hollis Mann was his best investigator and she still hadn't found any clues to who was behind that.

Jack had gone over the security measures and rather than change everything he'd left some holes. Hard to find holes that he could keep an eye on. Nothing had happened so far.

Nothing he knew about, he reminded himself.

He'd told Elizabeth it could be someone who had been suborned since the last vetting, but he suspected the mole had been in place all along. Trent Kort, one of the CIA agents involved in the process, had been killed not too long ago. Hetty, tyotia, Duchess, who Jack trusted more than most, believed Kort to have ties to Farrow-Marshall and Kevin Balim. If Kort hadn't been snaked himself, he could still have been in bed with one. The CIA was infamous for its bad taste in allies.

But if Kort had been snaked, then the Goa'uld had moved on to a new host and was still out there.

He'd always known DC was a snake pit, but it sucked that that wasn't exactly a metaphor anymore.

And then there was Ba'al himself, whichever clone was still running Farrow-Marshall in the wake of using Jack's own op to wipe out his rival Ba'als.

Mal Doran had shown the IOA, but Jack had been aware for some time that there wasn't much to stop someone with a starship and a cloak from infiltrating Earth. Oh, not the Oranians or the Hebridans or Asgard, but even the Tok'ra and Jaffa looked human enough. All of them had their own agendas.

Even their allies had their own agendas.

He hated to say it, but he was damned glad Petya Chekov made it back from the Korolev. The Russian was his best ally within the Program and the IOA. He kept it quiet, of course, but sooner or later, he was going to need Chekov.

He'd joked with Weir that if he got taken out, Chekov wouldn't be a bad choice to take over Homeworld Security or the SGC.

"Move the whole god damn business to Russia. See how they like it. Besides, it might be skirting treason to say it, but their current guy is at least smarter than ours."

The thing was? Jack wasn't really joking.

He scrubbed at his face with his palms and went back to his paperwork – always, always, the damn paperwork, bureaucracy would kill him when even the Goa'uld hadn't managed it – but his thoughts kept circling.

They hadn't been able to get back inside the caverns at Glastonbury Tor. The communications console for the stones had arrived at Cheyenne Mountain fine and then Merlin's cave decided there would be no more in and out. Jack's ATA wouldn't get him in and Daniel had called earlier in the day to tell him it had locked him out too.

At least no one else could get in. Or so Jack hoped. Mystic goddamn Ancient gobbledygook gave him a migraine. If Daniel could figure it out, someone else could too and just because it wouldn't let Daniel back inside, didn't mean it wouldn't let someone new in.
He wished it hadn't let Daniel inside in the first place.

Daniel had promised to be more careful in the future. Jack believed that. He believed Santa Claus was going to bring him a lake full of fish for Christmas, too.

Daniel would try. For a while, until he got so excited about whatever he found that he plunged in feet first, more Indiana Jones than sedate academic archaeologist. Jack had come to realize Daniel's former colleagues had disliked him for more than his whacked-out theories back in the old days.

Maybe Daniel would find something from his list of artifacts Merlin had hid around the planet. Some of them had been unearthed and moved or lost. But maybe one or two would still be around. Maybe he'd find something to point to this Sangraal, whatever it turned out to be.

So, for the moment, Daniel was staying in England.

It was just a coincidence the Pegasus delegation wanted to visit England too.

Jack didn't believe in coincidence.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Everyone deserves some action from this fic, to go with the endless talking and meetings. I don't feel like I should need to warn for Goa'uld in a Stargate fic, but heads up, there's violence and death in this chapter.

Weir

"I think McKay is the weak link. Get him," Hank Landry declared. "We need to get a better handle on these 'Pegasans'." He invested a lot of scorn into his words and scowled to punctuate them.

Jack rolled his eyes.

Elizabeth pressed her hands together in her lap where the conference table hid the giveaway action. "Are you sure?" she asked. She wondered why she and Landry were even part of this meeting.

What happened on Earth was the province of Homeworld and the IOA, not the SGC. They could offer advice, but they had no real authority in the negotiations with the Pegasans. (There had been a great deal of debate over how to refer to them: pirates, Atlanteans, Expedition, natives, coalition, defectors… traitors. Pegasans had been the compromise everyone settled on. The Pegasans had eased some potential difficulties by not including any former Expedition members in their diplomatic representatives.)

Landry grumbled about turncoats, but Jack nodded sharply. "Look, Elizabeth, the only one we can say for sure is even from Earth is McKay. He has a sister, who is married and has a child. Say we used them as leverage, what do you think is going to happen?"

"He might –"

"They’d snatch all three of them up to their ship – and make no mistake about it, Hank, it is their ship now. They’d get pissed off and reveal everything the IOA and the Program have been working years to keep a lid on."

"We are close to Disclosure," Elizabeth pointed out.

Jack shook his head. "Not close enough, not ready enough, not with the Ori coming. The one thing that'll keep us all from being lynched is if we can assure the world the threats are gone."

"You consider the Ori the bigger threat?" It obviously puzzled Landry.

"Origin is the threat, Hank, not the Ori."

"It's a cult," Landry dismissed it.

"We have enough people killing each other over religion already," Jack explained. "What do you think happens when one comes along that can back up its promises?"
"Shit Marie."

Landry wasn't a genius, or even as gifted as O'Neill, but he had a lifetime of experience in the military and enough intelligence to grasp what had scared Elizabeth since she'd first heard of Origin. The Ori didn't want to destroy humanity. They wanted to destroy civilization, progress, and even independent thought. Too many people would rush right into that embrace of certainty and gladly turn on anyone who didn't. If Origin obtained a foothold on Earth, it could easily lead to a global war that no one could win.

Elizabeth desperately didn't want the people of Earth in the future to be sentenced to punishments, or to be burned alive as heretics for the crime of having ideas or asking questions. People could be so much more, given the opportunity. She'd worked for peace most of her life, because peace was the first step to a better life and a better human race.

The Ori could destroy all of it.

"We're drifting off subject," she said. "The question is should and can we bring the Pegasans back to the Mountain?"

"Shouldn't and can't, not without making an enemy that knows how to fuck us over," Jack said promptly. "You were there when Vala used their beaming technology to zap in and out of the Mountain to get Starbucks. Right through shields that will stop Goa'uld rings and Asgard beams." He made a face. "You know they've been sending someone down - Starbuck's isn't free. They had to get currency somewhere."

Shit, Elizabeth thought silently. She hoped they'd just pawned something, rather than going to one of the Expedition members' family. They'd all been declared dead and evidence to the contrary could blow up in the Program's face. It was the kind of back-from-the-dead story that drew the media like flies.

"So, we take her and bury all of them deeper, somewhere they don't know to beam them out," Landry suggested.

Elizabeth pinched the bridge of her nose.

"You think the rest of her crew doesn't have a plan for that?" Jack asked. He made a face at Landry. "Hank. Rodney McKay is the smartest sonovabitch in two galaxies, and the pilot, Abd-Ba'al, can make Ancient tech sit up, roll over and whistle Yankee Doodle. The rest of the crew are professionals who made their living preying on the Goa'uld and the Lucian Alliance and fighting Wraith. And they are all loyal to the death to Mal Doran. If you think they don't have a plan for if something happens to her or to any of them, you need to turn in those stars."

"We can't afford to make an ally into an enemy," Elizabeth said.

Landry scowled.

"They sent people who weren't from Earth," she added, "but their approach and offers all indicate their strategy is based on knowing the SGC, the IOA, and Earth as insiders. They know our secrecy from the general population is our weakness."

"We'd survive it," Landry said stubbornly.

"Yes," Elizabeth agreed, "we would. But there would be chaos and loss of life that we could avoid."
"And Mal Doran is a spiteful bitch," Jack added. "She'd go through with the threat of giving the Wraith our galaxy and Earth's address. We've got the Ori to worry about, we don't need to face off with the space vampires. The Goa'uld are still hanging around, Ba'al is still a threat, and the Lucian Alliance hates our guts. If we slip, one of them will be on us like a starved dog on a Philly cheesesteak."

"Can't we just tell them to get out?"

"They're offering naquadah and Ancient technology in exchange for not much, really," Elizabeth said.

"They're fucking with us," Jack grumbled. "Hank's right about that, but the Tok'ra have been doing that for years. At least they aren't snakeheads."

"The question we should be asking is why they're playing this game," Elizabeth said. She did wonder, but she also thought that the Expedition members were lonely for Earth, for a connection, even if they no longer considered it home or their first loyalty. They longed for that sense of contact and not being alone. They wanted to help but without sacrificing their independence. Jack took a more jaundiced view of their reasons.

She had discussed it all with Jack in private, but it would be too telling if she didn't say something at this meeting. Hank Landry didn't just run the military side of the SGC. He reported to people above Elizabeth, the same way she did on him. Checks and balances.

Spying, as Jack put it.

She was far better at it than Hank Landry and he reported exactly what she wanted him to report, but she had to bear in mind that someone among the people reading those reports was smarter than Hank Landry. They wouldn't just read what was there but look for what wasn't. It was a delicate dance, much like coaching a blindfolded bear to perform a Japanese tea ceremony.

"Could be there just aren't any societies advanced enough to trade for what they want in Pegasus," Jack said with a shrug. "Daniel said the Wraith had been knocking down anyone that got past the industrial revolution. Basically, the same shit the Goa'uld do to keep everyone ignorant and scared, but with the added nightmare bonus of eating them."

Elizabeth nodded and glanced down at the file she hadn't bothered to open since bringing it in with her. She already knew the contents. The files were simply props to remind Landry who was in charge and that she wasn't there to fetch his coffee.

She wondered how much spit men like Landry swallowed over their lifetimes, never knowing. It helped sometimes.

"Speaking of Daniel – "

"We weren't," Jack interrupted.

"We are now," Elizabeth continued with a tight smile. "The President wants him at the briefing, along with you and I."

Jehan

Jehan sprawled on a sofa, looking out the penthouse windows at the London skyline. Mer was
flipping through one of his stacks of physics journals. Little noises of outrage periodically escaped him like steam from a bubbling pot, prompting furious scribbles with his red pen.

Vala and Haemi were debating whether it would be worthwhile to buy some edged weapons. You can never have too many knives was a credo both women embraced. But Pegasus had amazing bladesmiths and buying weapons made their Tau'ri watchers nervous.

They were trying to relax.

They had tickets to the opera in the evening thanks to O'Neill. Jehan wasn't sure thanks was the word for it, but the non-Tau'ri were thrilled. Since their first exposure, they'd insisted on acquiring recordings of every opera possible.

Mer had retaliated by purchasing a grand piano and an orchestra's worth of other fine musical instruments, along with a library of scores. Again, Jehan was unsure how this constituted fair punishment for making him listen to *Rigoletto* ten times.

He had acquired the complete discography of Johnny Cash, however. MP3 and vinyl, along with a superior turn table and sound system. It was already aboard *Revenge*.

Once the IOA had accepted they weren't going to stay locked under the Mountain, Colonel Paul Davis was assigned as their Homeworld liaison. Jehan had been skeptical, but Davis proved an efficient facilitator. Forty-eight hours after being introduced to them, Davis had IDs, passports, the UN Laissez Passers, and bank accounts set up for everyone.

Russia had been happy to launder the diamonds and other materials they'd brought, just as Radek had predicted. Davis had subtly tried to find out where they'd got their American currency before and been sent on a wild goose chase through every pawn shop in the country. That had been Jehan's idea and he still found it amusing.

They were dealing in sums that normally only governments handled, but that only made sense: they were on Earth as representatives of Atlantis and Pegasus, not pirates.

Davis arranged the purchase of a building in DC to serve as the Pegasus embassy. No doubt he would also make sure it was properly bugged before anyone moved in. The Russians would have been happy to provide pointers.

Of course, they didn't give a damn about the embassy in DC – it was merely a point to beam down to and use as an address. When they left Earth they would abandon it.

They went to New York instead and acquired a floor on a newish skyscraper that had already been quietly purchased through one of Quindozum's shell companies. Several programmers and security people also already hired through Quindozum did a clandestine install of physical and cybernetic security measures for the entire building.

Ronon didn't like New York and Vala was restless so they had moved on to London, hiring the two top floors of the Dorchester on Davis' recommendation. The hotel was experienced in dealing discreetly with security issues.

And rich weirdos, as Mer had put it.

Jehan wasn't too thrilled with it. The fussy décor made him miss Atlantis' spare, elegant lines and even the plain efficiency of Revenge's corridors and quarters. The Dorchester made him think of Goa'uld and their taste for opulence.
They ended up visiting a lot of museums. Haemi and Teyla and Dushka and Signe were all fascinated to see the history of Tau'ri civilization and how it had developed without the withering interference of either Wraith or Goa'uld. They also shopped. Vala shopped at least, while Mer approached shopping as an annoyance mitigated only by his lack of a budget. The scientific equipment and larger items went to an address Davis had arranged, where it was beamed up to Revenge. They ate out, sampling every cuisine available. Teyla struck up conversations with random people because she enjoyed learning about everyone. They went to movies and live shows – everyone enjoyed theatre and Vala loved musicals.

Out of courtesy they mostly stayed together so the Marines and British security assigned to shadow them weren't over-stretched. The Marines, at least, were read in and knew the score. It made them more comfortable to be around. Haemi and Ronon even persuaded several of them to hang around after their shifts and talk about the differences and similarities in militaries on Earth and elsewhere.

They were having a flamboyantly good time and being just reckless enough to keep all attention focused on them.

Melena wanted to tour hospitals and universities and said so over a lunch they shared with Davis.

Davis had come back this morning with an offer for Melena to get a private tour of a medical museum outside London. A security escort was already arranged. Ronon hadn't been interested, but several others had gone with her.

Teyla paced into the room and over to Jehan. She gazed out the windows in the direction he had been. "What do you see that I don't?" she asked quizzically.

"Nothing," he replied. "You probably notice stuff I take for granted."

She patted his shoulder. "We'll go home soon enough." She looked out again. "It is beautiful."

"Yeah, I guess," Jehan agreed.

"Oh my God, Tunney!" Mer exclaimed and threw a journal to the floor. "How is he even alive? He's too stupid to breathe!"

Everyone had looked at Mer and Vala began laughing only to cut it off abruptly.

Mer had snapped his attention toward the doors. Jehan felt it, the bone-crawling buzz of naquadah that signaled a Goa'uld or Jaffa were close.

They all heard the sharp shout, cut off, and the distinct sound of a zat firing then the whining cycle as it powered back up.

"Goa'uld," Vala said.

They all dived for their weapons, the ones they had refused to be without. The IOA disarmed them before they left the Mountain. They'd simply re-armed from Revenge once they were alone again. O'Neill had to know they would, but the IOA were oblivious to what you could do with Asgard beaming. No imagination, as Mer had condemned them.

They hadn't expected an attack, but they were ready.

"Jaffa, kree!" the Goa'uld commanded. The Jaffa shoved through the last set of doors.

They'd taken what cover they could in the room. None of it was very good, but zat fire dissipated
against whatever it hit instead of punching through like a bullet. Unfortunately, several of the Jaffa were using guns, though their aim sucked.

Jehan and Ronon fired their blasters. Mer joined them, while Teyla used a zat and Haemi had a Wraith hand stunner.

Vala had a blaster like Mer and Jehan's, along with a zat, but she took the time to yank the kara'kesh onto her hand while crouching behind a heavy white sofa. The stuffing had begun to smolder; another shot and it might catch on fire. The hot reek filled the air.

Jehan cursed and wished for his Kull armor. The blaster fire sizzled futilely against the Goa'uld's shield. He crab-crawled to the other end of the sofa he was behind. A little distraction would help… He snagged the journal Mer had tossed, rolled it tight and launched it toward the Jaffa. It came open in a flutter. Jehan bopped out the end of the sofa, down as low as he could get on his belly and elbows and fired. He didn't bother with torso or head shots. The blaster took out the Jaffa's knees and ankles, tumbling them down.

Then he shot them in the head.

The Jaffa were outmatched. They weren't any good at improvising or fast reactions the way the pirates were. Jaffa were rewarded for unthinking obedience, not quick wits, though they weren't necessarily stupid. They just didn't use their brains. Independent thinking wasn't encouraged, and it had cost them and their Goa'uld masters. The Tau'ri had changed the game, but the Jaffa hadn't changed with it. They weren't used to operating without their armor, or against anyone who wasn't panicked and or another Jaffa. Jaffa didn't take cover. Jaffa didn't snipe. These weren't exactly the cream of Jaffa warriors, either. The last one went down and only the Goa'uld was left.

Goa'uld never expected anyone to have anything that would match their technology, either.

Vala opened her hand so the gold on the kara'kesh glinted and caught Jehan's attention. She mimed a stabbing motion. He nodded and switched his blaster for a sleek dagger.

"Your weapons cannot harm a god," the Goa'uld laughed. It was the Dorchester's assistant manager; he'd been handling everything for their group. He stepped over his fallen Jaffa carelessly and walked deeper into the room. "Fools. I am a Am-heh! I will devour you."

This again, Jehan thought, mentally rolling his eyes. Like anyone, even the Jaffa, bought that clunker anymore. Now the new bunch of evil Ascended, the Ori, they seemed alarmingly god-like. The Goa'uld, though, were practically passé. And Am-heh had never been more than server at Ba'al's table. Jehan ought to know; he'd listened to Ba'al mock the minor Goa'uld serving in his court more than once. Not that Am-heh would remember a mere slave, even a lo'taur.

Am-heh laughed and fired at Haemi as she tried the Wraith stunner on him.

Teyla snarled as Haemi fell. She fired her zat and rolled into another position before Am-heh could target her.

Mer popped up and fired his blaster. Am-heh's shield flared white and yellow. Mer dived out of the way of return fire and Ronon popped up on the far side of the room, blasting at Am-heh's flank.

Jehan belly-crawled toward Am-heh in the center on the room. Teyla reached around the corner of a chair and blind-fired toward the Goa'uld. Ronon used the opportunity to surge into the open, catch Haemi's collar, and yank her behind an up-ended table.

"One shot," Mer yelled, "she should be okay!" That was for Teyla and Ronon's sake; Jehan and
Mer were more than familiar with how zats worked.

Am-heh had reached the center of the room. That put Jehan at his flank, huddled low beside the cracked coffee table. The stuffing in the sofa finally fully caught fire, sending up a puff of black smoke that set off the smoke detector's wail.

Vala jumped to her feet and extended her arm, palm open, using the kara'kesh. The power sizzled against the shield.

"Pitiful," Am-heh declared in that deep vibrating voice they affected. It looked at Vala, eyes flared white, so sure it was safe from everyone else in the room. Jehan knew that was her plan. "You are but a hollow remnant, a false vessel, do you think that you can match Am-heh?"

Vala didn't, but she was the distraction. Jehan moved with deceptive stealth, slowed and just beyond Am-heh's peripheral vision. Goa'uld shields responded to energy and impacts, not the motion of a body, otherwise every movement would lock one up. Jehan came to his feet and thrust the dagger through the shield and the back of the host's neck.

When Jehan had fled Ba'al with Vala, one of the first things she'd taught him was where to knife a host to kill or at least wound the Goa'uld within. He knew he'd succeeded when Am-heh screamed. It collapsed to the floor and the shield flickered out.

In the next second the host seized, bleeding and thrashing across the rug beneath it. Jehan danced back away from it. The man's throat bulged and rippled.

"Shit," Mer exclaimed, "get away from it, it's coming out!"

The host's jaw jacked open farther than it should have and the Goa'uld writhed out in a gush of scarlet blood. It shrieked and spread its spiny fins as it reached the floor. Jehan had wounded it with the dagger; bright blue blood gushed in pulses from a puncture a hand's span below its head.

"Watch the blood!" Vala said. "It's poisonous."

Am-heh screeched in fury. It slithered across the rug toward where Haemi still lay on the floor, intent on acquiring a new host. Ronon pulled a knife and threw it. It sunk into Am-heh and pinned it to the floor.

Vala appeared frozen, staring at the Goa'uld. Jehan went to her side.

"I remember," she said. "I remember what it felt like."

Jehan sent a panicked look to Mer. Mer looked nearly as mesmerized as Vala did.

"The Jaffa held me down. One of them pried my mouth open for Qetesh."

"Vala, don't – "

"I remember the feel of Qetesh sliding into my throat and choking me before she ripped through to my spine. I knew when the pain was gone I was gone too," Vala whispered.

"You're not gone. You never were. But Qetesh is," Jehan told her.

Vala gave him a haunted smile. "Gone but not forgotten," she quipped weakly.

"That's a Goa'uld?" Ronon asked. It clearly was, but he was trying to distract Vala. He had to raise his voice over the smoke detector and screeching parasite.
Jehan still held his own dagger. Red and blue blood from the host and the symbiote streaked the blade. "Yes," he answered.

"Want me to kill it?"

Teyla crouched next to Haemi and checked for a pulse while keeping a wary eye on the wriggling Goa'uld. It was a strong one. It would tear itself and the knife free from the rug and floor soon.

"Do it," Jehan said. "We haven't got long before someone shows up to check out the alarm." They needed to clean up and figure out a cover before someone showed up. At least Am-heh had been a typical over-confident Goa'uld and had no back-up.

Vala pulled her zat she from the back of her waist. She methodically fired it three times at Am-heh.

"Zat the bodies too," Mer said. He was white-faced, but functioning. He activated the comm to Revenge. "We need a beam up on my mark. - The best way to handle this is to not be here."

Vala used the zat to get rid of the Jaffa. Ronon picked up Haemi over his shoulder.

"Ronon, Teyla and Haemi," Mer said into his comm. "Now."

The modified Asgard beam surrounded them, shining whiter and brighter until Jehan couldn't make out their figures, then winked out.

Jehan policed up the weapons. Mer snatched up his laptop and tablet where they'd ended spilled on the floor. "Come on," he urged.

They could hear people in the far hall.

"No time," Jehan said before Vala could zat the dead body of the host. He crowded close to her and Mer joined him.

"Now," Mer said into his comm.

The beam snatched them and deposited them on their bridge. Teyla was already accompanying Haemi to medical. Ronon swung around. "I need to check on Melena."

Mer pulled out a cell phone. Melena and everyone else had one. Mer had equipped them with Alteran based encryption. "Call her," he said. "Filan, boost the signal so it seems to come from the nearest London cell tower."

Filan waved Ronon to join her at the comm station.

"Okay, what next?" Mer asked.

Jehan glanced at Vala, but she was still off, not in any state to run things. That left him. But for once he felt competent to do that.

"Yeah, we're going to take advantage of the fact beaming technology isn't widely known on Earth," he said. "You, me, and Vala will beam back down to London, but not the hotel. We will very visibly arrive at the front, proving we couldn't have been inside when the Jaffa attacked. When we're questioned, we just won't know anything."

"The Laissez Passers from the UN mean the cops won't be able to mess with us," Mer said.

"Better to have an alibi anyway," Jehan insisted.
"Okay."

Ronon re-joined them. "Melena and the others are fine."

"Good."

Jehan took a breath and remembered he still had a knife in his hand. He set it aside and checked his clothes, then Mer's and Vala's. They looked all right. No blood or damage.

"Ronon, you and Teyla and Haemi will beam down to your suite on the seventh floor as soon as she comes around – you brief her and Teyla. Just like us, you don't know anything about anything that happened," he said. "You were there the whole time."

"I'm just muscle," Ronon agreed. "Got it."

Okay. They didn't have a lot of time to establish their alibi. Time to go.

"Nakez, we need to be beamed somewhere within walking distance of the Dorchester."

Nakez pulled up a map display. It had several locations highlighted – locations they'd scouted while pretending to just be strolling around London – where they could beam without being spotted. "How about this one?"

Jehan nodded. "That works." They could walk to the Dorchester's front entrance and get themselves on CCTV and traffic cams with time stamps.

"Vala?" he asked.

She drew herself up and took a deep breath. "Ready, darlings."

"Mer."

"If I have to."

Jehan nodded to Nakez. "Ronon –"

"I've got it," Ronon assured him.

The beam took them again.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

AN: I plotted and drafted this before the end of NCIS latest season and its events. So there are characters present that canonically no longer are. I'm mincing my words because I don't wish to spoil the episodes for anyone who hasn't and wants to see them unclued in. I won't be as careful in comments though, fair warning.

Ellie Bishop

Ellie had been to London before. She'd honeymooned there, although the memory wasn't so sweet now that she'd divorced Jake. She watched out the window of the cab, feeling sour and grubby from the flight. She'd managed to catch some sleep over the Atlantic, but military transports were never comfortable.

Of course, Gibbs couldn't let them check in to their own hotel and clean up. They were headed straight for the Dorchester Hotel.

She wondered what US Marines had been doing at the Dorchester. She and Jake hadn't been able to afford anything that expensive. They'd find out soon enough, she supposed. The NCIS team that handled investigations in NATO territories would have the preliminaries covered by now.

Clayton and Gibbs both looked crisp and unbothered by the rain sheeting down. They waved away an offer to take their coats once they were inside. Nick was shivering because he never remembered a decent coat to check. Ellie and McGee both looked like drained rats by the time they reached the lobby with its mirror-polished marble and warm light gleaming from gilt and fresh flowers even long past midnight local time. The air held the scent of real flowers, delicate and better than anything artificial. The contrast of antiques and ornate interior made the heavy security presence at the front entrance and inside stand out even greater.

The concierge was on the left and the front desk was straight ahead. A central hall lavishly decorated with a sofas and chairs in conversation groups stretched through the hotel behind the front desk. Five men were obviously waiting for them; two in unprepossessing American-tailored suits and three who looked more comfortable in their surroundings.

The two Americans reached the NCIS team first. "Agent Gibbs?" They flashed their own NCIS IDs. Clayton peeled off from Gibbs and headed for his countrymen.

"Preliminary findings," Special Agent Bremer, a buff blond wearing hipster spectacles, said as he handed over a flash drive and printed file. Gibbs tossed the flash drive to Tim. "The Metropolitan Police handled the scene, but they've shared nicely. Don't ask me why; it isn't normal."

Bremer's partner, who was almost as tall with heavier muscles and tired gray eyes, sighed and introduced himself, "Tom Benjamin." Ellie liked his handshake: warm hand, gun-callused, a firm
hold that didn't linger over long. Even better, he looked at her face and not her chest. "You're Bishop, right?"

"Yes, and this is Nick Torres and Tim McGee," Ellie introduced them. "That's Clayton Reeves over there."

"One of our people is going to meet Dr. Palmer when he arrives and take him straight to the morgue. He's been cleared to go over the marine dead." He grimaced. "We're working on access to the other casualty."

Gibbs was paging through the paper file and quizzing Bremer. He didn't give a damn that were all standing in the middle of the floor, dripping like they'd been fished out of a river. "Where's the fourth marine?" he demanded.

"Hospital," Bremer answered. "The Met has a guard on him, so do we."

"Who's talked to him?"

"No one," Bremer replied. "He's in a coma or something. They've got him on life support. It didn't sound good."

"Not shot?" Gibbs demanded.

"None of them were." Bremer scrubbed his hand over his eyes. He and Benjamin would have been working on this case since the victims were identified as Marines over thirty-six hours before. "The cops already had a hazmat team in and out to check for NBC trace. Everyone was shitting bricks in case it was bioterror incident or the Russians and their fucking polonium again."

Gibbs nodded at that. NCIS had had their own eyes opened to that sort of threat years ago. Guests at the Navy Yard were now scanned for more than guns, knives, and explosives, though no one talked about the Geiger counters that were installed at all the entrances.

Benjamin nodded to Clayton and the others. "Brace yourselves. The ginger is a Chief Inspector. If he's not Special Branch, I'll eat my shorts. The other two are from MI5 and 6. Brown and White. Or maybe it's Smith and Jones."

No real names and not even an attempt to pretend they were anything but anonymous spooks, Ellie understood. She stared and tried to memorize their faces. They were both average, with mild expressions, brown hair, nice suits, and chilly eyes.

"Why would British Intelligence be interested in dead Marines?" Tim asked.

Nick chuckled and slapped Tim's shoulder. His jacket squished; Nick made a face.

"Timmy, Timmy, Timmy. They're dead in this fancy as fu – high class place. It's all about money. They don't care about the marines; they want to know about whoever they were guarding," Ellie considered and agreed Nick had a point. The Dorchester was the sort of place where if crimes happened they were hushed up, because the people who stayed there had pull. Whatever had happened here had been so messy it couldn't be brushed under the rug. That kind of mess drew spooks like flies. When the powerful got upset, they complained and called in favors, and all kinds of secrets came spilling out.

No doubt someone at the NSA as well as the CIA would be going over all the telecom intercepts from the Dorchester and everyone involved in the investigation, like miners panning for gold. They'd be lucky if they got a speck of dust, but sometimes there would be a nugget.
Thinking about the NSA reminded her of her ex-husband, though, and soured Ellie's mood further.

Gibbs would hate the Dorchester. He had no respect for the rich and powerful. Not that their team would be staying in the Dorchester. NCIS per diem for travel accommodations ran more to the sort of hotel where you were lucky if the room had its own bathroom.

Clayton was leading the three Englishman over to them.

Gibbs looked up from the file and glared. "Who the hell are you?"

"Detective Chief Inspector Martindale." He held out his hand. After a long pause, Gibbs freed one hand to shake it. "My colleagues, Mr. White and Mr. Brown from MI5 and MI6, will be observing."

"Like hell."

"This isn't your patch, Agent Gibbs, and you have a reputation for riding roughshod." Martindale had a Yorkshire accent.

"I'm afraid that won't be tolerated in this case," White said. Homogenized BBC anonymous voice, Ellie made a note: anything identifiable about him had been stripped away. She would have to remember him as the taller of the two. "Your marines were part of a security detail for a group of visiting diplomats."

Gibbs said nothing, but his expression grew stonier. Diplomatic immunity was one of the myriad things that infuriated him.

He ignored White. "McGee," he snapped, "I want everything on the marines. Find out who they were guarding and why and when we can talk to the survivor. Bremer, get him wherever he needs to go." He marched past the desk and turned right toward the elevators. Ellie and Nick gave Benjamin an apologetic look and they all trailed after Gibbs.

Gibbs was a good boss in many ways: he cared about getting the job done and respected competency more than anything else. He couldn't be bought, beaten or blackmailed into giving less than his best to every case. He let his team do things however they liked as long as the job was done. But he was also unreasonable, had impossibly high standards, and demanded everyone on the team give up any other priorities. Someday, Ellie knew she would have enough of that and likely end up quitting or fired.

For now, she was still learning from him, especially how far sheer balls could take you if you just pushed hard enough. It was an utterly different way of operating than the calm 'mediate and cooperate' method she'd learned growing up. Ellie was aware utilizing Gibbs' style would get her dubbed a bitch, but it was a tool. She didn't have to use it, but it wouldn't hurt that she could.

Another roadblock appeared on their way to the crime scene. Met police constables in uniform and armed British Special Forces commandos were guarding the elevators. Ellie figured more would be stationed in the stair wells at the sixth and seventh floor. The elevator to the eighth floor required a special key card. Martindale caught up with them, cleared Gibbs' team through and produced the keycard. "Normally, only the guests, their security, and hotel staff have one these."

"Well, yeah," Gibbs replied with a roll of his eyes. "I didn't think they were giving them out like candy."

Martindale started the elevator up. "In this case," he said, "Only the manager and assistant manager had access. Staff and maintenance were cleared up and accompanied by the clients' security. The
clients took the Royal Penthouse and two suites on the seventh."

Who are the clients? Ellie wondered. They had to be rolling in it to hire the Dorchester's penthouse and command US Marines as security outside the US. She would have thought they might be State Department, but that would have come out by now. They had been able to strong arm the Dorchester into restricting even its own staff's access, though. Or maybe it had been the British Government applying to pressure. Even oil sheikhs and Russian oligarchs couldn't manage that.

Martindale cleared the team through the mixture of military and police guarding the first scene. Needing someone else's authority to get through just added to Gibbs' perpetual ire. The elevator opened on a wide corridor. "Right," Benjamin murmured. "Corporals Inouye and Baker were guarding the doors." The doors were mahogany that separated the public portion of the hall from the penthouse portion.

The scene began in front of them.

Two marines had died there. The bodies were already gone; it had been almost twelve hours since the attack. Instead there were two outlines where Inouye and Baker had fallen. There was a burn on one silk-covered wall, black at the center and blistered at the edges, but no bullet holes. The two marines hadn't had time to fire back.

Ellie picked her way closer and peered at the carpet. Okay, that was weird. She frowned at what wasn't there. Nick leaned over her shoulder. "What do you see?"

Keeping her voice low, she said, "I don't see any blood."

Nick scowled and pointed at a dark stain on the expensive beige carpet. "Then what's that?"

"Sniff," Gibbs told him, looming up to make them jolt in surprise. It was one of his favorite tricks.

Nick made a face, but Ellie did as Gibbs suggested and immediately got a whiff of ammonia and feces. The stain in the carpet corresponded to where the body let loose of its sphincters.


"Come on," Gibbs said. "The local guys have everything on this scene. Palmer will go over the bodies."

They'd shed Tim and Bremer, but Benjamin was still with them. Martindale and Gibbs walked side by side and he fell in with Nick and Ellie. "You notice?" he asked. He gestured with his hand low to his side at the wall.

Ellie wondered if he meant the lack of blood or something else. "What?"

Benjamin side-eyed her. "The burn on the wall. I can't figure out what made it. You?"

"Nope," Nick answered. Ellie nodded. It was another mystery to add to the list. Flame thrower? Gas torch? It looked more like something electrical. Taser? No, it was much too big.

Beyond the double doors the hall stretched past a kitchen and other rooms into the penthouse itself. There, it finally looked more like a crime scene: bullet holes, furniture tipped for cover and leaking tufts of stuffing, the glass shattered in one window, wet cold air leaking in from the night time view of Hyde Park. Two more body outlines, more blood smears and pools than those outlines could account for and more of those strange burn marks.
Gibbs stalked around the wreckage of the once lovely room. He didn't say anything, but every
detail he took in made him visibly angrier.

"Where the hell are the other bodies?" he demanded abruptly.

Martindale glowered at him. "Your other marine was there." He pointed to the doorway. "The
marine who survived was there." There was the floor beside a tipped over sofa that probably cost
more than a month's rent for Ellie's apartment in DC. "The assistant manager was here." Martindale
stepped up to the middle of the room. Blood had ruined the beautiful rug.

"What about all these blood stains?" Gibbs pointed to them. Ellie counted nine. "Look at the
dammed spray patterns. Look at the bullet holes. There were more people in here."

"I'm not a blind man," Martindale snarled. "But all I can tell you is that there were no other bodies
when the first officer arrived on scene."

"And how long did that take?" Gibbs' tone clearly implied the responding officer must have
stopped for tea and crumpets downstairs.

"Six minutes from the first call."

"Christ," Gibbs muttered. "Witnesses? These goddamn 'guests'? Where are they? Why the hell
don't I have names yet?"

"The 'guests' are in the Oliver Messel suite – "

"And where the hell is that?"

"One floor down," Clayton supplied.

Tom Benjamin joined Ellie and Nick going over the crime scene and the rest of the rooms in the
penthouse. Nick kept up a patter of smart-ass remarks about the luxurious, very 'English' décor.
Ellie looked for personal items that would tell her more about the people staying there, because
this attack must have targeted them.

She found surprisingly little. Either they travelled light or they'd cleared out everything they
deemed important.

"The Sultan of Brunei used to stay here," Benjamin mentioned as they went through the bathroom.

Nick stopped and looked around. "Wow. Who's the Sultan of Brunei? Is that like the Sultan of
Swing?"

"God, you're weird," Ellie told him. "No. The Sultan of Brunei is… rich. Real rich. Owns his own
country rich."

"Sounds fun."

She poked around the dressers and closets, finding a mixture of men's and women's clothes. Two
different sizes in the men's wear. All of it was new and expensive. The women's wear veered to the
wild and edgy, but it was almost all couture items. All of it of was handmade, nothing off a rack.
Whoever she was she preferred boots. Ellie found only two pairs of heels, nude and black. The
clothes were significantly smaller than the men's sizes, so they didn't belong to one of them.

She glanced back at the bed and blinked. One king size bed, three people. Oh. She wished Tony
was still around. He would have had something funny and borderline crass to say about that.

There were books and magazines everywhere. She checked them. Most were in English, with fraction in French, German, and Russian. Several of them had slips of paper, even a napkin, tucked between the pages. She picked one up and flipped through the pages.

"What've you got?" Nick asked.


"There's piles more in the dining and living room too," Benjamin said. "Geophysical and Astrophysical Fluid Dynamics."

Nick picked up another journal and glanced at it. "Astronomy and Astrophysics."


Ellie flipped open Icarus. It was written and printed in English, but so densely packed with formulae it could have been Klingon for all she could get from it. Someone had scratched out notes in the margins though, crossed out formulae and written different versions beneath or next to them. The math was just as impenetrable as the articles, but the notes were hilarious.

*Imbecile! Beamer, you fatuous jackass. What is this, the Dark Ages! Einstein did not say that. That leech, that was my work!!! THIEF. Pinhead. Huh. SLOPPY! They're still publishing this fatheaded ninny's crap? Did all progress stop when I left?*

In less emphatic and outraged writing, the commenter had written, *Markova's wasted on the Russians. We should steal her.*

In a different hand, someone else had written below that, *We don't steal people.*

A third chicken scratch was barely legible. Stole you. Ellie frowned at it until she realized the writing looked like someone who had learned the English alphabet after learning something utterly different like kanji.

*Can we at least offer her a job?*

Ellie laughed.

Gibbs raised his eyebrows.

"Someone here is either a mathematician or a physicist, I think," Ellie told him. She held up the magazine. "And doesn't think much of the articles in these."

"Bombs?" Gibbs asked immediately.

"No," she said. "You can have Tim look at this, but it's all freely available."

Gibbs dismissed the journals with a shrug. "All right, I want to talk to the witnesses."

Clayton sidled closer to Gibbs and spoke in a voice meant just for them. "You can't go in there throwing your weight around."
That earned him an icy, narrow-eyed look.

"These people are untouchable –"

"No one is untouchable."

Clayton grimaced but went on, "Maybe not, but you have no authority here beyond courtesy. No one wants to ignore the dead marines, but – " He swallowed hard. " – if one of these people killed them? They're going to walk."

"That what your spook buddies were telling you?" Contempt dripped from Gibbs' words.

"Not your country or your rules," Clayton reminded him with admirable cool. Sometimes, the team bought into the Gibbs mystique too much, but this case would be a reminder that it didn't count for that much outside NCIS, never mind outside the US.

Gibbs let out an inarticulate, angry hmph. He said nothing as they went down a floor and headed for another set of rooms.

Sotto voce, Benjamin plead, "Tell me he's this charming because of jet lag."

"This is Gibbs being charming," Nick replied.

"Quit yammering and do your jobs," Gibbs snapped at them. He had remarkable hearing for someone who had been in the military and used firearms for so many years.

**Gibbs**

He was seething. Everything about this case infuriated him, from the moment Vance called him into MTAC and gave it to him along with a warning to tread lightly. Three good marines had died. Diplomatic repercussions or not, if these people weren't helpful, he was going to rip them all new ones.

Fuck lightly.

Someone knew why. They were going to tell him.

He wished he had McGee to get him backgrounds on all of them. He needed leverage.

Bishop would have to do, but unlike McGee, she wouldn't bend the rules or hack classified information for him. Torres was fine with doing whatever it took, he was pragmatic, but Bishop wasn't fully on board yet. That was why he'd had to send Quinn back to FLETC; she kept backing up Bishop and questioning Gibbs' methods. Bishop would never be as blindly loyal to him as Abby or as ruthless as Ziva, but she was coming along. He'd have her molded into one of his agents in another year or so. He couldn't trust Reeves with anything; that one had his own agendas. It might be best to leave him behind when they closed the case.

He wouldn't have anyone on his team with divided loyalties. God knows, he should have learned that lesson with Ziva. He'd thought the personal would translate to political and it hadn't; she'd never completely shaken off her ties to Mossad and her father.

The local NCIS man had names for him at least.

"Valaria Doran, Jehan Shepherd, Meredith McKay, Ronon and Melena Dexter, Haemi Dell and
Teyla Magen. Signe Saarinen, Dushinka Saarinen and Tilden Farnes checked in with them, but aren't here."

"Bishop, find out everything you can on them. Get McGee on it."

Gibbs stared at the group sprawled around the frou-frou penthouse living room. Everything was carved or gilded or over-stuffed and colorful. It was still raining outside, but the view onto the terrace showed the dull gray dawn creeping in from the east. Most of the interior lights were off; it leached the color from their faces. Or maybe it was room. Gibbs wasn't a clumsy man, but the decorations made him feel awkward and about to break something.

Which made him want to break something.

One of the women walked over. She smiled at Reeves, then eyed Bishop, sharp as a hawk. "Call me Vala."

Valaria Doran.

"What exactly do you do?"

"Oh, I'm in transport," she replied airily, "and… acquisitions."

The stocky man sitting in an over-stuffed loveseat, with a magazine and pen in hand, snorted. His companion sharing the loveseat kicked him in the shin.

"We need to talk to each of you about what happened."

"Didn't we already do this once?" rumbled the big one with the dreadlocks. Bored and annoyed and coiled up like panther on the love seat with a pretty, curly-headed woman asleep against his shoulder.

"Afraid you'll need to do it again, buddy," Torres announced. Bishop handed him her phone and he looked down then up. "Mr. Dexter?"

"Call me Dex." Dexter grinned, all white-teeth and alarming glee, as he stood and stretched. He managed it without waking the woman, who curled up with a protesting noise. He loomed over Torres.

Like the Doran woman, Gibbs couldn't place his accent, but he recognized the way they moved. They were combat vets and still vigilant with adrenaline a day and a half after the shooting.

They weren't what he'd been expecting. It threw him off-stride, but only a little.

"And what do you do?" Gibbs asked him.

Dexter offered another of those terrifying grins. "Security."

"Then what the hell were four marines doing here?" Gibbs let how pissed off he was leak into his voice.

Dexter shrugged dismissively. "Ask their bosses."

"Spying," the stocky man commented.

His friend punched him the shoulder while shaking his head. "Mer – " Gibbs put that together into Meredith. So that was McKay. The sleeping woman was probably Dexter's wife. Which made the
man sitting beside McKay Jehan Shepherd since the other two were both women.

"What? We didn't want them."

"They were doing their job." That from the tallest woman. Magen or Dell? She looked like she could snap The Rock in two like a toothpick. She was watching them, measuring them and whatever threat they might pose. Security like Dexter, Gibbs speculated, but not the contract-hire sort. Everyone in the room oriented to each other, constantly aware without working at it. They'd have worked together a long time to aquire that team sync.

"Well, if their job was getting killed," McKay sniped.

Gibbs wanted to punch the arrogant piece of shit for that disrespect.

McKay threw the magazine onto a coffee table. "Since no one told them what they could be facing," he snapped, "that must have been their job."

"That's the way their military works," Shepherd commented. He sounded bitter. McKay grabbed his hand. Gibbs paid attention to that. Relationships were always a good lever. "It's all lies and secrets. Besides, they were briefed."

McKay picked up another magazine. "Not well enough. Fine. Whatever. We can at least explode some scientists' brains."

"Hush," Doran ordered. She smirked at Gibbs, before a flicker of what might have been honest emotion crossed her features. "They were lovely boys."

"They died well," Dexter agreed.

"They're still dead," Gibbs said flatly. "I want to know why."

The tiny woman who had been silent, sitting poised and still and watching them all, stood. She'd been evaluating them while Gibbs had been trying to do the same. Bronze hair, skin that was a warmer, darker shade like the beautiful golden oak stain he'd used when he made Kelly's crib. She had dark, dark calm eyes that caught his gaze and held it.

"Special Agent Gibbs," she said. "Please accept our heartfelt regret and sorrow for their loss. Such pain is known to us and though we had not known Milo, Paul, Graham and David long, we knew them as brave, good men. Our ways are not yours, but we would very much like to honor them. If there is help we could offer their families, we would offer that too."

"You can't throw money at it and make it all better," Gibbs snapped at her and immediately felt like an asshole. She hadn't meant it that way.

Possibly an asshole who was going to get his ass kicked, if the way her eyes narrowed meant anything, aside from the sudden tension throughout the room. The Rock's worst nightmare looked poised to become Gibbs' by the curl of her lip. These people were close-knit and wouldn't put up with anyone messing with one of theirs.

They weren't what he'd expected, and they still hadn't given him any goddamn answers.

"Torres, take Mr. Dexter to another room. Interview him, then his wife," Gibbs ordered. The wife had woken, and sat blinking drowsily, with her legs curled under her.

"My wife wasn't here," Dexter objected.
"I don't care."

He went on, "Bishop, interview Mr. McKay." He let his lip curl. He'd still like to punch the guy, so this was him playing nice and pawning him off on Bishop. "Reeves, Ms. Magen." He turned back to the Doran woman, who was watching, arms crossed under her breasts, hipshot and radiating amusement. "I'll start with Ms. Doran, then Mr. Shepherd."

Shepherd waved a hand at him, like this wasn't serious. Gibbs hated slackers like that.

"We'll move on from there."

"I'll be sitting in with you," White said.

The spooks had been quiet, so Gibbs had been ignoring them. The reminder that he couldn't ignore them completely, couldn't throw them out, couldn't drag anyone into an interrogation room and hold them there until they panicked enough to spill their guts, left a foul taste in his mouth.

He had to bite back the rising fury and it fleetingly occurred to him that he was always angry now. Since the coma and the amnesia and the aborted retirement to Mexico, everything had been tinged with anger. It surged against his control and his grip on the reins was slipping more and more often.

Gibbs pushed the thought away. He had his job to do. Nothing else mattered and anyone who didn't like how he did it could get out of the way or get run over.

Doran rolled her eyes but followed him into another room. White followed silently. She seated herself without waiting on them and proceeded to examine her manicure. The interview went to hell from there.

He couldn't shift her, couldn't get past the mocking, over the top sex-kitten persona she projected. She wasn't even trying to make him believe it, either. It was a taunt. Gibbs decided to dial himself back, cozy up instead, since he couldn't threaten or intimidate her; White's presence made sure of that. But Gibbs sensed that even an actual beat down wouldn't impress this woman. She was hard the way Ziva had only dreamed of being.

That set off Gibbs' alarms.

"I'm afraid we can't tell you much," Doran told him. "None of us were in at the time." She was lying without even trying to pretend otherwise, daring him to do anything about it.

"Where were you then?"

"Oh, in the other suites or out. Walking. Window shopping. I love shopping. It's almost as good as – " She stopped and laughed. "Never mind. London is marvelous." She softened a little. "Melena loves the museums."

"You've never been here before?"

She tipped her head back and laughed. "Your next question is where I'm from, isn't it? Someplace very, very different from your London." She added something in a guttural language Gibbs didn't recognize. White flinched hard enough that Gibbs noticed.

"Madam Doran, please, I must remind you of one of the agreements with our governments," White said. "No mention of certain parties to those who haven't been cleared for it."
Doran sneered at White. She wasn't any more impressed by him than by Gibbs, at least.

"What exactly do you do?" Gibbs asked.

"I work for the World Bank," Doran answered, a hint of laughter in her voice again.

"Doing what?"

"Telling them how I would rob them."

Security. Bullshit. Monetary security contractors couldn't afford the Dorchester, didn't rate marine guards, or have government intelligence bigwigs shitting their pants to keep them happy. It was a black op. It had to be. The Marines would have been in place to guard her, but also to make sure she didn't connect with the wrong people. This reeked of Hetty's games, games Gibbs swore he'd never play again after Poland.

"So that earns you a pass on murder?"

"I didn't kill your marines," she snapped. "I didn't want them here."

"Because you knew this would happen?"

Doran sneered at him. "If gods could see the future, they wouldn't die."

*What the hell did that mean?* Gibbs studied her, but Doran wasn't giving anything else away. He'd caught her on a raw spot but couldn't figure it out. Step back, he told himself, come at her from a different angle.

Tony would have teased and flirted and quoted stupid movies and had her eating out of his hand. Gibbs reminded himself a good man would be happier that Tony and Ziva were raising their daughter together somewhere safe. He resented their new life, though. Not to mention that now he had to do the paperwork Tony had always done for him. McGee just gaped at him like a goldfish when Gibbs tried to shove it off on him.

"And the rest of your group, do they work for the World Bank too."

"Special Security," Doran replied. "It's classified." She said it like was a huge joke. Maybe it was to her. White took it seriously though: he'd gone slack-faced and pale. Whatever Doran did or knew, the prospect of her spilling it frightened White. White and his government and the US government too.

"We're done here," White declared. Doran strolled out with a switch to her hips.

"If you're going to cut my damned interviews short, you can go get my next one," Gibbs snapped at White. "Get this Jehan Shepherd in here."

**Ellie Bishop**

Ellie wasn't sure if she wanted to shoot McKay or just run for her life. She couldn't keep him on track, couldn't get any straight answers from him, and couldn't understand half of what he did say. One more physics lecture, complete with math so far over her head it may as well been in orbit, and she might end up catatonic.
In between showing off how smart he was, McKay managed to insult her personally, women in general, men, the US government, the Nobel Committee, dogs, body builders, one of the hotel's restaurants, the fashion industry, Mark Zuckerberg, Steve Jobs, Neil deGrasse Tyson and Brian Greene. He reserved his greatest vitriol for someone named Malcom Tunney. If Tunney had been one of their victims, Ellie would have put McKay at the top of the suspect list.

McKay seemed utterly oblivious to her reactions, but his mouth, which drooped a little on one side, twitched like he wanted to laugh at her. He would spin into a new rant whenever that happened, flailing his hands, and illustrating esoteric math on a tablet he shoved under her nose repeatedly.

Ellie had learned, more from Tony than Gibbs, who demanded rather than explained, to pay attention to body language.

McKay kept dropping his hands to a belt that wasn't there. His right hand tried to rest where a holstered pistol would have been.

His hands themselves told a story too. McKay's hands were scarred, callused, and stained from using them hard. Three fingernails on his left hand were deformed the way McGee's were after Paraguay.

When he noticed her interest, McKay remarked, "I used to be married to a smart blonde."

"So, what happened?" Ellie asked.

"I said she was smart. She divorced me."

"And she took your fingernails in the divorce?"

McKay laughed at that. His divorce must not have been as nasty as her and Jake's. "No. I pissed off some people. It's a habit." His hand drifted to his forearm and traced a spiral over his sleeve. His blue eyes focused on Ellie again. "I can keep quiet when I have to."

That was it. She wasn't getting anything more from him.

McKay was no soft academic, Ellie realized, and he'd been talking circles around her through the entire interview. She hoped Nick or Gibbs had more luck.

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Gibbs

White left without speaking.

Gibbs pulled out his phone and set up a quick conference call with McGee, Bishop, Reeves, and Palmer. Face to face would be better, but he needed to get this done before White came back. His instincts screamed that the clock was ticking on this case and they'd lost irreplaceable time crossing the Atlantic.

"Boss?" McGee asked.

"Tell me what you got."

"Problems."
"What?"

"The marines are squeaky clean, but they were all TDY to Homeland Security, the Office of Space Security, under the command of General O'Neill – "

"That sonovabitch," Gibbs said. The *Office of Space Security*? OSS. That had Batshit Jack's dumbass sense of humor all over like a kid's sticky fingerprints. OSS meant exactly nothing useful. In some ways, Gibbs admired that dedication to not giving anything away, but adding O'Neill to this mess was just what it didn't need.

Gibbs kept poking, but he'd failed to unearth anything on O'Neill's program. Whatever it was, it was big enough O'Neill had been set up at the Pentagon and given title at Homeland, to watch over it.

DC normally leaked like a shower head turned on full, but O'Neill's people weren't the normal DC or even Pentagon climbers. The only clue Gibbs had dug up was an acronym, SGC, and the same advice: stay out of it.

"And I ran into a brick wall there," McGee continued apologetically. "So, I took a look at the people they were assigned to guard." Reading between the lines, McGee had tried hacking through their security and failed.

"And?"

"I checked with Customs here, and they flew into Mildenhall from Hanscom last week on an Air Force C-38 with a stop to refuel. Except for McKay, they're all Maltese citizens, but they're travelling on red D-2 UNLPs that say they work for the World Bank."

Shit.

United Nations Laissez-Passers worked much the same as a diplomatic passport and provided the same protections for those carrying them. Fucking no wonder Doran was laughing at him and taunting White. She knew Gibbs couldn't touch her. God damn it, Reeves had been right. Un-fucking-touchables.

And it tied back into O'Neill's Special Access Program. Gibbs despised SAPs and the goddamn Special Access Required markings that went on everything related to them along with the NDAs that grew around them like kudzu. Nothing should be excluded from investigations.

"How are they all from Malta?" Torres asked.

"My guess?" McGee speculated, "They bought themselves citizenships."

"You can do that?"

"€650,000 will buy a Maltese citizenship, no residency required."

"Jesus," Torres said.

"That's almost six million euro," Bishop whispered.

"Five million, eight hundred fifty thousand," Reeves provided. And citizenship got them European Union passports with visa-free travel through most of the West. The interesting aspect was that they or someone had shelled out the money to obtain legitimate papers. "Teyla Magen is not Maltese, but I could not ascertain where she is from. Her English is fluent and includes American
and English slang, along with some German and French phrases."

"Did you get anything useful?"

"I'm afraid she may have learned more from me than I did from her," Reeves admitted. "But I did catch Mr. Grey addressing her as Ambassador."

"Well, she isn't the Ambassador of Malta!"

"No, but it's not the sort of title that gets used as a nickname, either," Bishop pointed out. "They may be part of a classified diplomatic negotiation. It would explain the Marine guards if they've been targeted."

Gibbs bit back a groan. It sounded possible, but targeted by who, targeted why? If they were undercover, then how had they been found? If they were undercover -

"Where's McKay from?" Gibbs asked.

"Meredith Rodney Ingram McKay has a new Canadian passport," McGee reported before Bishop could answer. "He was born there, but he went to school in the US and was immediately recruited by a military think-tank when he graduated. Physics and astrophysics. He left the think-tank to work for the DoD. Whatever he did for them is classified. Wherever he did it too, he doesn't change his official address or the state he pays his taxes for seven years, until moving to Colorado to work at NORAD on deep space radar telemetry. A year later, he's declared dead. The paperwork to amend that went through last month. Married and divorced from former Major Samantha Carter, USAF. Who is also dead."

Round and round, they went. McKay’s history led them back to the Air Force. McKay wasn't undercover and if he wasn't, then there was no point to the rest of them using false identities.

McKay’s interests explained the journals Bishop had noticed in the penthouse, at least. McKay didn't fit the image Gibbs had of a think-tank egghead, though. He had a stocky build that should have gone soft if he spent his time writing equations. Instead he had moved too much like someone trained to defend himself, if not actually military.

"Did Carter die the same time McKay supposedly did?"

"No, her date of death is eighteen months ago. Cause of death and everything else is redacted."

"Last address?"

"Colorado Springs."

Schriever, Peterson, the Air Force Academy and NORAD, there was a buffet of military, particularly Air Force, to choose from in Colorado Springs. Unless the connection was a red herring and whatever ops were being run from there had nothing to do with what had happened in London.

Gibbs didn't believe in coincidence. "Find out where our four marines were before their current assignments."

O'Neil had been in Colorado Springs until his promotion and move to DC. Gibbs fingers itched. There was a thread. If he could just catch hold of it and pull, everything would unravel, and he'd have all his answers.
"Bishop, what did McKay have to say?" he asked.

"That he decided to quit," she said. "He's been travelling the world and had no idea he'd been declared dead until recently, but that the Canadian government is much smarter than the US and cleared up the problem and issued him a new passport recently." She paused and then added, "And then he made some very disparaging remarks about Steven Harper, before declaring Malcolm Tunney was a threat to the scientific community that should be barred from publishing."

"Anything useful?"

"He and Doran and Shepherd were sight-seeing when the Marines and the assistant manager were killed. Dexter and Magen weren't with them and he couldn't say where they were. Melena Dexter and Dell were touring some medical museum."

"Torres?"

"Dexter says he and Magen were downstairs when they heard shooting. They went up, found the bodies and were there when the police and hotel staff arrived. His wife and the Saarinans were in Lambeth, touring the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's museum by special appointment." Torres coughed. "It's a good alibi: they had a private car and driver and two plain clothes cops shadowing them. The big cop here, he confirmed."

What the god damn hell? The time lines made no sense, but Doran and her crew weren't stupid. Why would they lie? And if they weren't lying, what the hell had happened?

"McGee, get me every bit of CCTV and surveillance from the hotel and surroundings."

If McKay and Doran were telling the truth, there should be video of them returning to the hotel.

"On it," McGee said.

What else did he have to cover? Autopsies. Du – Palmer. He had to deal with Palmer while Ducky was in New York teaching and writing his damn book. He was sure he'd included Palmer in the conference call, but Palmer hadn't said anything.

"You there, Palmer?"

"Yes, sir," Palmer piped right up.

Gibbs squeezed his eyes shut. The enthusiasm and terrorized fumbling got old. A year. An entire year of dealing with Palmer instead of Ducky. He wondered if he could stand it.

"Do you have anything useful to add?" Gibbs asked with strained patience.

"Yes. Yes, I do. I attended the examination of Mr. Paul Bowditch – that was the – "

"The assistant manager who was killed along with the Marines." Gibbs still hadn't made sense of the way the dead had fallen. Bowditch might have been coerced into disabling the hotel's internal security and taking attackers up to the private suites, but Gibbs' instincts were insisting he'd been part of the attack.

"Mr. Bowditch died of a through and through burn, cause unknown," Palmer said. Excitement and worry blended in his description. "The closest I've seen to whatever did it were the burns on Col. Young in the Reinhart case."
Another case Gibbs had lost to the spooks. The thugs who pulled the trigger on Reinhart were dead, but he'd never have a chance at whoever hired them and killed Young. O'Neill and his damned SAP and Homeland with its high hand... He had an ugly feeling in his gut about this case. It felt like the same shit.

"While I wasn't conducting the autopsy myself, Dr. Channerjee invited me to consult while he worked," Palmer went on. "He found evidence of a knife wound at the back of Mr. Bowditch's neck. It severed the spine but was not the cause of death. Mr. Bowditch succumbed to anaphylaxis because of a toxin or poison. Dr. Channerjee speculated the knife might have been coated with it. He shared a sample of the toxin – Abby is analyzing it now."

"Anything else?"

"Yes! Yes, I remembered Col. Mann's request that we examine Col. Young's esophagus and spine closely – "

"Get to the damn point."

He could hear Palmer gulp. "Mr. Bowditch had unexplained damage at the cervical spine at C1 through C7, including holes in the vertebrae. The nerve tissue was swollen from irritation and the *Semispinalis Capitus* was shredded, along with – "

"English, Palmer!"

"The muscles that move the neck," Palmer simplified for Gibbs. "The back of his esophagus had a hole in it the size of a cola can, and his throat and mouth showed recent, even post-mortem, cuts and abrasions. I've never seen anything like it." He paused. "Honestly, it looked more like something pushed out of his throat from his spine than anything was pushed in and retrieved, but that's impossible."

Would Hollis answer him if he called her? Gibbs wasn't sure. She might have answers, but would she offer them? Because Hollis obviously knew something. She'd been looking for whatever happened to Bowditch with Young. Or would he just be alerting her and whoever she really worked for – O'Neill and whoever pulled his strings these days – sooner instead of later?

How did the assistant manager of the Dorchester play into what looked more and more like a US black op?

"Thank you," Gibbs remembered to say. "Get me whatever you can on the Marines as soon as possible."

"I'm starting the first examination as soon as you're done with me, sir."

"Good. Go. Call me as soon as you have more."

He ended the call and shoved his phone in his pocket. A moment later Shepherd sauntered in ahead of White and smirked at him. "Is it my turn in the hot seat?"
I do know how Sheppard's name is spelled. However, it's Shepherd on his Maltese passport, just as Vala and Teyla and all the others have had their names 'Earthified'. When Gibbs or his people are thinking, speaking, and so forth of Jehan, they're thinking of him by the alias on his passport. So, when you read 'Shepherd' instead of 'Sheppard', it's deliberate.

Just be grateful Jenny Shepard isn't in this.

On a nicer note, comments indicated people looked forward to Gibbs and Jehan facing off. I didn't have that in the story, but I went back and wrote it in. If you see something off in that section, it's not my beta's fault. She hasn't seen it.

Jehan knew ex-military when he saw it. He pegged Agent Gibbs as former Marine Corps. He had that drill sergeant attitude that made annoyed Jehan in anyone who wasn't an actual drill sergeant training recruits. The rest of the time it was bullshit. Marine officers didn't go around yelling at their men; that wasn't how you made good soldiers obey.

He contrasted Gibbs with Bates and found the NCIS agent wanting. Bates knew how to evaluate a situation and put aside his assumptions and prejudices. Good non-coms, especially experienced sergeants, kept the military functioning. The methodology of a sergeant didn't translate to civilian life, though. There was a reason most people didn't enlist. Bates understood how to work with people who weren't in the military.

Jehan hadn't missed the Air Force in years. Agent Gibbs reminded him why.

He felt like shit over the four SGC assigned marines the Jaffa had killed in the attack. They hadn't seen it coming and hadn't had a chance. Am-heh and his Jaffa were dead though; there wasn't much more justice going for them than that. Even if Gibbs knew what was really going on, he had no chance of taking down the Lucian Alliance or the Trust, so Jehan had no guilt about stonewalling him.

If he'd thought Gibbs could get them, he'd have had no problem giving the British spook sitting in on the interview the finger and spilling the IOA and SGC's secrets like so much soured milk. As it was, he meant to ignore White. Or was it Gray? The man was professionally forgettable.

"Name?" Gibbs demanded.

"I have one," Jehan replied.

The pale-eyed glare might intimidate most witnesses, subordinates, and suspects. Jehan had been tortured, killed, revived, and lived with the prospect of hosting an alien parasite that would take
over his body and mind. Before Vala found him, he spent years believing Earth had fallen to the Goa'uld when Apophis came through the stargate. He'd faced an insane, starved Wraith and Acastus Kolya.

Agent Gibbs didn't scare him and it wasn't because Jehan had diplomatic immunity.

"Don't get cute," Gibbs snapped.

"'Mer says I'm too pretty for my own good," Jehan agreed. He added a smart-ass smile. He'd pissed off so many superior officers agreeing with them in just that tone. Something about Gibbs brought out the absolute worst in him. He added, "Jehan Abd-Ba'al Shepherd."

He pictured the altered spelling in his mind each time he used the identity generated for his time on Earth. He didn't like using Shepherd, even if it was a different spelling, but Abd-Ba'al sounded too Middle Eastern in a world where the security forces used ethnic and religious and racial profiling. Their fake Earth names were supposed to sound normal enough to not draw attention, while still being close enough they'd naturally answer to them.

"Abd-Ba'al," Gibbs repeated.

Jehan settled into his seat deeper. "Got a problem with Muslims?"

"Convert?"

"I don't believe in gods."

White twitched. Gibbs glared at the man briefly even though he hadn't even spoken. Jehan decided he might have some fun with that. How many times could he make White flinch?

He'd spent exactly the right amount of time with Vala.

Gibbs' stare sharpened. He waited for Jehan to continue, but Jehan stayed silent.

"You're Maltese?"

"So my passport says."

"Maltese citizenship is for sale."

"Enough money will buy anything. The economy needs hard currency. It's a small island."

"You think money will buy you an alibi?"

White stifled a cough. Gibbs ground his teeth. Jehan suppressed a smile.

"I already have one," he replied. He was starting to enjoy himself. He used to do the dumb insolence routine with superior officers; he didn't even have to worry about demotion or a shitty write up torpedoing his career with Gibbs. "Whatever happened, I wasn't there."

Gibbs didn't shift or fidget. Jehan didn't either. He knew his apparent relaxation offended Gibbs. He was used to his stillness disturbing interviewees. Gibbs was the kind of guy who had to the top dog in any room. Working for him was probably a nightmare unless his superiors kept him on a short leash.

A clap of thunder made Jehan jolt. He spent most of his time aboard ship. He wasn't used to weather. The suite had a lot of glass – London's lights turned the rain running down it silver by
night. It reminded him of Atlantis, the only place he had spent much time on-planet.

He wished they were done with this shitty dog-and-pony show on Earth and headed home. He missed Atlantis, which surprised him. He'd been leery of the way it crept into his head, but outside of Revenge, it was the closest place he'd had to a home since Earth. And his time on Earth had already proven to him it wasn't home any longer.

"What brought you to London?" Gibbs asked.

Jehan watched the windows a second longer then looked back to Gibbs. "Most of our business was done – " White cleared his throat. Jehan smirked at him. "Teyla needed a break before she bit some asshole's head off and Vala likes shopping." It was a vaguely truthful answer. He just left out the part where they were being dangled as bait by O'Neill, along with playing fox to the IOA's hounds, waltzing around the world recklessly so no one noticed the important stuff being done quietly in the background.

"You work for Ms. Magen and Ms. Doran?"

Jehan tipped his head to the side. "I'm just a pilot, Agent Gibbs."

"Just a pilot doesn't get a room in a place like this." Gibbs injected a lot of scorn in one sentence, managing to condemn Jehan and the Dorchester. Maybe he had a little in common with Mer after all.

White sighed to himself, probably silently offended that anyone got to stay at the Dorchester, never mind Philistines like Jehan or Agent Gibbs.

"Well, then, there's the part where I'm Mer's partner slash plus one."

"You don't mind him sleeping with Doran?" Gibbs tried to slide in the knife. Blow up Jehan and Mer's lives. Who cared about collateral damage left behind so long as Gibbs pried out information he wanted?

"Been going through our underwear?" Jehan replied with a smirk.

"Your underwear was in a crime scene."

Fair enough. Jehan didn't care who knew he and Mer sometimes shared Vala's bed. They didn't care who knew on Atlantis or Revenge or all of Pegasus. They certainly didn't care what hidebound Tau'ri thought of it. They all liked sex and having it with someone you trusted was so much better, in whatever arrangement you all agreed on, than the gender binary straitjacket Earth's societies brainwashed kids into thinking was the only way to have relationships.

"As long it isn't a crime scene."

Gibbs slammed his hand down on the table in front of him hard enough to make the knickknacks on it jump. "You think this is funny!? Men are dead!"

"And you're spending your time sniffing dirty laundry," Jehan replied in a flat, bored tone.

He wondered if he could make Gibbs grind his teeth hard enough to crack one. Red blotches colored White's cheeks. This was the best interrogation he'd ever experienced. If Gibbs did lose his shit, Jehan was going to deck him.

Gibbs switched gears. "What 'business' were you almost done with before coming to London?"
"Technology transfer – "

White interrupted, "This interview is concluded, Agent Gibbs."

"What!" Gibbs was livid. "What the hell – "

"Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Shepherd," White went on.

Jehan raised an eyebrow. "Mr. White." He put some silk into his tone. "You're here because I'm allowing it."

Gibbs was staring at him.

"Don't interrupt me," Jehan concluded.

"Agent Gibbs isn't cleared for the information you were about to give him," White insisted.

Jehan had taken an immediate dislike to Gibbs. He had assuredly irritated and frustrated Gibbs just as fast. But this was ridiculous. Those four marines were dead – even the one who had still been breathing wouldn't last long; Jehan had seen people grazed by a second zat hit: they were brain dead. They had all been more than pawns; the way their deaths were being treated reminded him all too much of how the deaths of the soldiers in the gate room when Apophis came through would have been. The way his own 'death' must have been. Classify and bury and the truth. Their families would never know why or how they'd died or for what. Unlike Jehan's, those families probably cared.

Gibbs might be an asshole, but he was the only one standing up for those people.

"Maybe someone should read him in then, if they actually want this case solved," Jehan said.

"I'm afraid that's not possible at this juncture."

Jehan smiled at White. "Exactly what could you do to me if I ignored you."

White gave him a cold look. "Very little. But Agent Gibbs and anyone else you disclosed that information to could and would be detained under the Official Secrets Act among others. Indefinitely."

Jehan looked at Gibbs. "Up to you, Agent."

"This isn't over," Gibbs snarled at White. He stalked out of the room.

"It's your planet," Jehan told White. "Otherwise, I'd call your bluff."

White said nothing and followed Gibbs out. Jehan stared after them for a moment, then gave himself a shake and went looking for Mer.

Vala

Vala unzipped her nice, new, Earth-made boots and set them aside, then her socks, then wiggled her toes in the thick rug. Zippers were an excellent invention, but heels were the work of some sadistic Goa'uld. She slumped down into the cushiony couch and eyed her favorite people.
Jehan stretched and grimaced. Vala admired the way he went from acting relaxed to really melting into the soft furniture. Ronon, Teyla and Haemi had taken over one of the sofas. Melena was on Ronon's lap. They were all exhausted with aching muscles and bruises. Mer had made himself another cup of coffee and brought one to Jehan too before seating himself beside him. None of them had had a chance to ease off since the attack, never mind sleep. She wished Mer had brought her a cup because she was too tired to get up and get one for herself.

"Everyone remember this room has probably been bugged by now," Jehan said.

Mer huffed and corrected him, "You're not paranoid enough. They probably built surveillance right into the walls."

"It's not a bug, says the Dorchester management," Jehan declared in a bad accent, "it's a feature!"

Vala waited until they were finished chuckling and switched to the mishmash of Alteran and Trade Speak used most in Atlantis. Any English words she would switch out with Olesian whenever possible. Goa'uld was as compromised as English, so she avoided it too.

"Anyone think the snake attacked us by chance?"

" Anyone want to buy a boat tour of the Mojave?" Jehan replied using the same pidgin.

Vala moved over to the far end of the sofa Jehan and Mer occupied. If she had her way, she'd be sleeping with them later. She didn't want to be alone. Images of the symbiote trying to get to one of them played behind her eyelids whenever she closed them.

"The Jaffa were slow," Jehan said. He slumped against Mer and sipped at the coffee.

"You could tell they weren't used to being without the armor," Mer agreed.

Ronon, Teyla and Haemi listened with interest. Melena had a medical equipment catalog and was combing through it and only half-heartedly listening. Atlantis had medical equipment that outstripped anything on Earth and the Alteran ships had medical bays, but smaller items and supplies were non-existent or ten thousand years past their usefulness. It seemed like there was an endless list of things they needed and things they needed to make those things. Melena kept finding new items they hadn't realized they could use.

She wasn't interested in Goa'uld or Jaffa or Tau'ri and while she'd listen politely, she didn't pretend she was.

Vala didn't mind; Melena wasn't familiar with politics of the Stella Via and they needed the equipment lists. Medical supplies were among the few categories the IOA had no restrictions on them purchasing to take back to Atlantis with them. If Melena had been on the ship, she'd have been doing inventory. It was how she coped.

"Are you sure that beaming us back to the other suite and the subterfuge was all necessary?" Teyla asked.

"Yes," Mer stated. "Look, it was just less complicated all around to avoid the whole tangle of 'was it self-defense'. We couldn't exactly explain about the Goa'uld or the zats or the Jaffa without blowing the Program wide open."

"All I had to do was say technology transfer and the local spook shut everything down," Jehan remarked.
"And I'd prefer to keep that card up our sleeves, so I can threaten our dear friends in the IOA," Vala added. Playing cat and mouse with the unknowing investigators had been fun, too. There was a rush to it that she didn't bother denying to herself. Frustrating Gibbs had been a high point. He might have silver hair, but Vala didn't come from a culture that venerated elders.

And, oh, how mad he'd been! Her mouth curled into a smile.

"That poor man…"

"What?" Mer demanded of Melena.

She shrugged and sighed before answering. "The man who was possessed."

"Possessed," Mer echoed. "The assistant manager?"

Vala shared a look with him. She didn't know Earth religious beliefs beyond what she'd picked up through osmosis listening to him and Jehan and later the other Tau'ri. One of the reasons she kept sleeping with Stackhouse sometimes was how amenable he was to her quizzing him after sex. He'd patiently explained all sorts of things to her. Even the phrase 'horizontal dictionary'. She'd learned enough about Earth's myths and Christianity to think 'possessed' described hosting a Goa'uld very well. There was nothing voluntary about it; the Goa'uld was not a guest. It took over and used a body like a thing, a possession, and the experience itself had left Vala feeling corrupted by the parasite's evil. The Goa'uld fit the definition of demons far better than gods.

The Satan as a snake thing explained why the Tau'ri insulted Goa'uld by calling them snakes too, even though Goa'uld weren't reptiles at all.

"He couldn't have chosen to take on one of those things," Melena finished. "It killed him."

"There are those twisted enough to volunteer," Vala said. Qetesh had believed Ba'al's host chose to be one. Qetesh had found that baffling. Not the host, but why Ba'al would want him; Qetesh enjoyed torturing and taunting Vala whenever she was bored with anything else. Vala suspected a Goa'uld as smart as Ba'al had probably found ways to entertain itself and torture its host anyway.

Maybe that was why he'd wanted Jehan as his lo'taur. To taunt his host with the prospect of rejection in favor of taking over Jehan.

Vala shuddered just imagining Jehan as a host. It would destroy him.

She'd been holding onto the thought that if it ever became necessary, a symbiote - maybe a Tok'ra - could save Jehan, give her and Mer more time with him. But it wouldn't work. Jehan would never forgive her.

She glanced at Mer and his set frown.

Also, Mer would kill her.

So, it was delicious luck that among the items Tempesta's crew looted from Praxyon before destroying Ba'al's fortress, there was a sarcophagus. There had to be a way that Mer or one of the other bright minds in Atlantis could solve the problem with the sarcophagus turning its user psychotic. That was only repeated, short term use anyway.

"He didn't," Melena insisted.

No, Vala acknowledged, he wouldn't have, unless he'd been thoroughly lied to, and that didn't
count. Even she knew that. Poor bastard. At least his enslavement had been short.

"We should find out if he had family, do something for them," Melena said.

"No," Jehan said.

"What?"

Vala raised her eyebrows. Jehan had managed to surprise her. He was the one most likely to go soft-hearted. She'd have thought he would be sympathetic.

"It's not our world. It's not our responsibility to look out for their people," Jehan explained. "The SGC, O'Neill's Homeworld Security, they're the ones that should do something. They're the ones who failed."

Teyla tipped her head in thought before saying, "Do you think it was a failure, though?"

"You think they tipped off a Goa'uld because they're too spineless to take a run at us themselves?" Jehan frowned at the thought.

Mer shook his head. "O'Neill's a bastard, but he's not a coward."

Vala agreed based on her interactions with O'Neill. He was clever, but he was also blunt and sensible. It was a good combination. She thought he was more inclined to play games than Mer assumed, though, but he wouldn't betray people because it was the easy way to accomplish his goals.

"So, they have a leak," Jehan said. "And they have Goa'uld on the planet, operating under everyone's nose." He left the sofa to pace restlessly. Vala knew the feeling. Earth wasn't even her planet and knowing there were Goa'uld running loose on it disturbed her.

"Could you feel a difference between sensing the Goa'uld and the feeling you get from Mer and me?" she asked.

Ronon shrugged and Teyla shook her head. Vala had noticed that none of the people who tried Beckett's naquadah treatment buzzed her nerves as strongly as Mer did. Not even Jehan. If she wasn't thinking about them, she never noticed it.

But the Goa'uld had been like a jolt of raw electricity to her.

"Jehan?" she asked.

"The Goa'uld was stronger," he said after some consideration.

"It didn't notice anyone except you and me," Mer added. Excitement brightened his tired features. "It didn't think anyone else was a host."

Ronon got it and grinned. "We can sense them, but they can't sense us?"

"Exactly," Mer said.

It was Teyla who expressed what they were all thinking.

"That could be very useful, couldn't it?"

Vala was already trying to figure out how to use it for a job.
"Back to our current situation, though," Mer said, making Jehan and Melena both groan. "What? We need to figure out what's going on here."

"O'Neill may be using our presence as a stalking horse. He knows we can protect ourselves and we can act where he can't – officially," Jehan said. It was as obvious to him as to Vala.

She'd be more annoyed if it wasn't something she would do herself. Besides, it wasn't like they weren't running their own op behind O'Neill's back. Their very presence on Earth, the consulate in New York and the DC embassy, the tourist trip around the planet, the drawn-out negotiations with the IOA, it was all just a smokescreen. Well, not all; if Teyla came to an agreement with the IOA, Atlantis would honor it. But it was ultimately all distraction.

The magician's beautiful assistant, Radek had called them. Be sexy and annoying. Make everyone watch you.

Vala could do that with a smile.

Mer scrubbed at his hair, succeeding in ruffling it despite the short cut. "Yeah, O'Neill would do that."

"The question is do we act like we don't realize it, or get really indignant and threaten to pull out of negotiations?" Jehan asked.

Vala looked at Teyla. Vala was good at trickery and making people too mad to think things through; Teyla had the knack of keeping people calm and showing them how cooperating helped everyone, especially them. Vala considered it another kind of con game but admitted Teyla always crafted an agreement that benefited both sides.

Teyla was genuinely honorable without being stupid about it. In this case, Vala would follow her lead.

"I think we have to go on as we have planned," Teyla said. "When the Quindozum operation is complete and they have picked up everyone, then we withdraw the offer of *Tempestas* - claiming we can't trust them with an Ancestor warship when they have been infiltrated by the Goa'uld."

"Which isn't even bullshit," Mer agreed. "Where there's one Goa'uld, there will be others. They're like cockroaches with a taste for gold lamé."

**Gibbs**

Benjamin took them to a local pub to eat. It scraped off the spooks as it was not high-end enough for them. Gibbs gave the local agent points for that; it was smooth enough he wouldn't have pegged it if he hadn't caught the way Benjamin smirked when Gray shuddered at the name of the pub.

Gibbs wasn't expecting haute cuisine. He'd have been fine with take-out at the office, only they didn't really have an office to work out of in London. The pub was local, darker and more cramped than any tourist spot, and the smell of tobacco and beer soaked so deep in the stained wood that even nuking it might not get it out. It wasn't really Gibbs' usual kind of place, he'd never been a bar-crawler any more than he liked night clubs, but it was decent enough.

The bartender recognized Benjamin when they trooped in and nodded toward the back. Bremer and
Palmer were already ensconced there with pints of dark beer.

"Bobby'll be fine with us getting some takeaway in here, he doesn't do food," Benjamin said.

"Sounds fine."

"Indian? The place around the corner is good."

"Just make sure you get something mild for McGee," Ellie piped up.

"Torres?"

"Hotter the better."

"You may regret that." Benjamin pulled out an old-fashioned notebook and took orders from everyone. He promised, "Back in fifteen."

McGee pulled out his cellphone and Gibbs was about to head slap him for it, but then realized his agent was scanning the booth.

Bremer's eyebrows rose but then he shrugged. "We are regulars."

Spies loved it when people were predictable. So did soldiers and cops, Gibbs acknowledged. If the NCIS agents here made this a haunt, someone in Special Branch would know. It would be simple enough for MI5 to bug the booths just in case they ever yielded some useful slip-ups.

"Clean," McGee declared and shut off his phone. He even pulled the battery. Gibbs followed suit and then so did everyone else at the table. He hated the damn things, even though he enjoyed being able to yank his team's chains twenty-four/seven. But the way they could be flipped into surveillance you unthinkingly carried on you was just number one on his list of drawbacks.

"Information?" Gibbs asked. "Impressions? Give me something useful. Palmer, how did those three Marines die?"

"Four," Palmer said. "Our fourth Marine died in the hospital earlier –"

"Why wasn't I notified?"

"I'm telling you now," Palmer said. He straightened in his seat and glared back at Gibbs. "If you have a problem, take it up with the British or the embassy or the US Marine Corps, not me." Or find yourself another medical examiner trained to Ducky's exacting standards willing to put up with you. Good luck with that, asshole.

"All right," Gibbs replied.

"I'll autopsy him tomorrow morning," Palmer added, "but I did get to look at his medical charts. He likely died of the same thing that killed the others – which I can't identify, but had an effect like microwaves – possibly some kind of radiation –"

"Hazmat cleared the scene," Bremer interrupted.

Palmer just looked at him until Bremer sat back. Gibbs suppressed a smile. It was good to see the kid coming into his own. It was probably damn hard to be assertive while always in the famous Dr. Mallard's shadow. Much as Gibbs missed Ducky, working on his own seemed to be doing Palmer some good.
And although Ducky seemed ageless, he was getting on.

"You probably think microwaves make you glow in the dark," Palmer said.

"No, just their clocks," Bremer teased.

"Go on, Jimmy," Ellie prompted him.

"DARPA has been looking at microwave weapons," McGee added. "Could it be something experimental?"

Gibbs thought of McKay and his physics journals and past with DoD. Was McKay the kind of guy who could build a ray gun? He pictured those sharp blue eyes, the thin-lipped mouth, the bull-like strength in the man's shoulders.

Yeah, yeah, McKay would make a ray gun and the US military would buy it in a hot minute. Was that Shepherd's 'technology transfer'?

If it was, the big brass would do just about anything to keep it from getting out.

Four Marines? A hotel manager? Small potatoes compared to a new weapon that could change the face of the battlefield just as thoroughly as computers and gunpowder had. _God damn it_. Maybe it wasn't McKay, but there was something behind this clusterfuck, something big, something hooked back into O'Neill and Homeland and whatever black ops were being run from Cheyenne Mountain, because four Marines didn't die for deep space radar telemetry.

"How would I be able to tell?" Palmer asked. "No one wants speculation. I can give you facts. Gibbs will have to take it from there."

Benjamin rejoined them with two bags overflowing with food. Everyone ate with a near grim speed, used to being interrupted or called away from meals - when they didn't miss them completely.

"Good food," Gibbs allowed. DC had good restaurants, but he appreciated the atmosphere of the pub and takeaway more than linen and fancy silver anyway.

He let the examination of the case lapse while they ate. They didn't need to discuss dead bodies and autopsies that urgently.

Once the food was out of the way, they all naturally fell back into discussing what they knew and what they needed to find out.

Plus their gut feelings.

Torres put aside his weirdness and joking in favor of the skilled deep cover persona and said, "They're dangerous." He looked round, but no one disagreed. "All of them. If I had to guess, I'd say they weren't trained in the West, but they're definitely operators."

"Black ops?" McGee asked.

"That's how they read."

"Even the egghead?" Gibbs questioned that assessment.

Torres frowned before nodding. "He probably didn't start out as one and he's definitely not military, but yeah. That Ms. Magen, she's very smooth. I got nothing from her she didn't want to give up.
And I can't figure out where she really comes from."

That fit with what Gibbs did and didn't get from Doran and Shepherd.

"Shepherd's American," he said. He thought about it and added, a little disgusted, "US military at some point." There were just little bits of body language and phrases that were easily recognizable to someone from the same culture. That was the purpose of military training after all: inculcating certain skills and attitudes too deeply to ever shrug them away.

Bishop tipped her head before she agreed. "I think so, too."

"Dexter?" Gibbs prompted.

"Professional military," Torres said, "but not ours."

"Any idea what they're really doing here?"

"Nothing so far."

Their stories were bullshit, but they checked out. McGee had worked his magic, likely bending or breaking a few rules along the way, and accessed all the cameras the hotel itself had and anything else from nearby. They had the assistant manager and six large men in overcoats, hats, and scarves that obscured most of their features coming in through the back of the hotel and up the service elevator to the penthouse floor.

What happened to those six other men? Gibbs wondered. Where the hell did they go? They had to have left the scene somehow.

"McGee," he growled.

"I know, boss, but the cameras were shut down on the seventh and eighth floors. We know they got off the elevator and then nothing." McGee looked as frustrated as Gibbs felt and even more exhausted, even though he'd slept through the entire flight from Andrews to Lakenheath including the stop to refuel. Twins would do that to you, even if they slept and woke in synch.

That reminded him, "Delilah have any help while you're gone?" He knew McGee had had their home completely redone to accommodate Delilah's wheelchair, but twins were a hell of a lot for anyone to handle by themselves.

"Her mom's staying with us, we've got a diaper service, and there's a nurse who comes in for five hours four days a week, so Delilah can go out or take a nap," McGee said. He had his laptop out and was typing while he talked. "Ellie did the background check on the nurse for us."

Benjamin looked delighted. "You've got new babies? Pics, man! Show me."

"Later," Gibbs told them sourly

McGee didn't protest. He did push one key particularly emphatically. "And here, less than fifteen minutes after the attack, I've got five different cameras showing Doran, McKay and Shepherd coming down Park Lane and entering the hotel."

That matched what Doran and Shepherd had told him, along with what Bishop got from McKay. But watching the three of them on the crappy video, he knew it was all bullshit. They moved as a team, hands free and close to their waists, eyes scanning the street and above for threats. McKay's gaze flicked to each camera emplacement and he guided the others to ensure clear shots for facial
Establishing their alibi. But there was no way they could have gotten from the penthouse to the other end of Park Lane in the time frame.

"What's making me crazy is I can find them having lunch at the China Grill," McGee said, "but I can't find when they left the hotel."

"Maybe they used the same unmonitored exit the six unaccounted for perps did," Benjamin said.

"You think the Dorchester has a secret, blind exit?" Bishop asked him.

"You know, it wouldn't surprise me. Either that or they rappelled down the side of the hotel at two in the afternoon and no one noticed." Benjamin made a face at his own words.

"Or an invisible, silent helicopter picked them up from the penthouse terrace," Torres offered cheekily. "Is DARPA working on one of those too?"

Gibbs couldn't take it. He stood up enough to reach over and slap the back of Torres' head.

McGee didn't blink, just said, "Probably," and Torres ducked and covered the back of his head and whined, but Bishop's eyes narrowed. Ziva had enjoyed watching him keep Tony in line, but Gibbs suspected Bishop would call him out if he did it to Torres too often. Hell, he expected Torres would punch him in the face if Gibbs took it too far; Torres ego was the real thing and deserved, not a mask for insecurity the way Tony's had been.

Investigators as good as Tony DiNozzo weren't thick on the ground. It took two agents to come close to filling his shoes on the team: Torres for undercover and Reeves for classic investigation.

"Anything else?" Gibbs asked.

"I'll keep digging, boss," McGee said.

"I can reach out to some of my contacts here," Reeves added. He'd been quiet up to now.

"Do that."

Reeves kept his thoughts behind a well-schooled mask of courtesy. He had fire under there but kept it under control. Gibbs wouldn't touch him, any more than he'd thump McGee: Reeves wouldn't tolerate it and McGee wouldn't be able to handle it. Different reasons, but neither of them would take any sort of bullying.

He got up and got himself a beer since there was no coffee and paid for a round for the rest of them.

They were a good team. Maybe not as good as Tony, Ziva, McGee and he had been, but nothing stayed static. None of them was a typical cop or federal agent and there was a reason for that. Several reasons. Gibbs preferred people who would bend the rules when he told them to. Most of all, he wanted people who looked at everything a little cock-eyed, saw 'normal' from outside the box, and who would question 'that's the way it's always done'. Brilliant, idiosyncratic people.

People Hetty Lange would have recruited.

Gibbs growled to himself. Hetty would always be a sore subject. Don't waste good. That included things he'd learned from enemies as well as friends.
McGee had the baby pictures out when he got back to the booth. Benjamin was practically cooing over them. He considered snapping that they had murders to investigate but held his tongue for once.

Palmer was already gone by the time Gibbs and the rest of the team left their hotel the next morning. The rain had disappeared, leaving the city basking in the sun. Everything looked clean and bright which just annoyed him. Not to mention his conviction that neither beans nor tomatoes should be breakfast foods.

Gibbs wanted to talk to Doran and Shepherd and McKay again. He wanted, so much it gave him heartburn, to yank their cocky asses into an interrogation room and keep them there until he could break them. He could accomplish the first part, but good luck with the second: no one was letting him drag diplomats down to NCIS regional unit office at Blenheim Crescent.

The cops and special forces were either gone from the hotel or better concealed when Gibbs stalked up to the concierge's desk and demanded to be cleared up to the seventh floor. He'd hoped to surprise the witnesses (who were suspects in his mind) early enough they'd be groggy with sleep and low blood sugar.

Instead, they were already all out on the terrace picking at the remains of breakfast, along with an addition: Hollis Mann.

Hollis was seated next to Melena Dexter. She looked right at home. Her smooth blond hair was gathered at the nape of her neck and she wore a tailored suit-dress that looked like soft gray wool. She gave Gibbs a Mona Lisa smile as he stepped out onto the terrace.

"Hello, Jethro," she said. He glared at her.

Doran flicked a gaze from Hollis to Gibbs and back, then she relaxed back into her own seat and laughed quietly. "Like that?" she asked Hollis. She was a sharp one to have caught that there was something between him and Hollis. Had been something, anyway

"I'm afraid so. Once upon a time."

Gibbs didn't blush. He hadn't blushed since boot camp. He did wince inside though. The amused way Doran spoke, and Hollis had dismissed the past had cut.

Worse, though, was knowing by just looking at them, that Hollis knew everything he didn't.

"Come on," he snapped at Hollis. He plucked the tea cup from her hand and thumped it down on the table, then took her wrist and pulled her to her feet. "We're going to talk."

That earned him sharp looks from his team and the suspects. Hollis shook his hand off but followed him inside.

"I'm not a naughty child," Hollis commented when they were alone in another overly fancy room. "Or a member of your team for you to abuse."

"No, you're a pain in my ass."

If Hollis had been a different woman, even one of his ex-wives, she would have made an innuendo
out of that. She was certainly quick enough. She had more self-possession than most people, though, and refrained. Gibbs had always appreciated that side of her. Hollis was always poised but didn't use it to discomfort other people.

They had different approaches. Gibbs liked to throw people off their stride, make them stumble and blurt out the truths they'd rather keep locked down. Hollis preferred to use calm and courtesy, letting her suspects relax until they slipped.

Her way took more patience than Gibbs had possessed in years.

"I want to know what's going on."

She touched her wrist with the tips of the fingers of her other hand and rotated it. He hadn't grabbed her that hard. It was a message; she let him do that, but no more: she would not allow him to push her around, physically or metaphorically.

"And I want world peace and a pony for Christmas." She gave him her best unimpressed look. "Are we done talking about our fantasies?"

"This goatfuck is connected to O'Neill's SAP, isn't it?"

Hollis smiled and said, "Denying it would be ridiculous considering I'm here."

"Read me in."

"No."

"No!?"

"Jethro, you're a muleheaded jackass," Hollis explained. "You regularly skirt or break the law, you encourage your subordinates to do the same, and you have no respect for anyone other than yourself. You walk through life wearing blinders and think everything is black and white: your way or the wrong way."

"I get the job done," he said resentfully.

"You get your job done and make everyone else's harder if not impossible," Hollis answered. "I've watched you for years, Jethro, and you've stopped caring about justice. Now it's about beating whoever you've decided is the enemy, and damn the torpedoes and anyone who is in your way."

"Cops aren't about justice, Hollis, we're supposed to enforce the law."

He could see her demeanor cool toward him. Her mouth folded down and she gave a slight shake to her head. The door behind him opened and he heard footsteps, but Hollis didn't shift her gaze from him.

"No, we're supposed to protect people," Hollis said. "Laws are meant to protect people, not punish them."

"Chicken or the egg," Gibbs said dismissively.

"If you can't see the difference, you shouldn't have that badge," Hollis stated. She nodded to whoever was behind him. "And that's another reason you aren't cleared for this operation."

"So, get me clearance!"
Shepherd ambled around Gibbs. A derisive smile was all he offered Gibbs; his remark was addressed to Hollis. "Bad laws are like illegal orders. It's easier to obey than to do something about them." Gibbs couldn't guess if that was dig at him or a warning to Hollis.

Shepherd glanced around, found what he wanted, picked up the tablet, and left the room without saying anything more.

In the quiet that followed Shepherd’s exit, Hollis stared Gibbs coolly in the eyes. "Or what, Jethro?" she asked finally. "What will you do?"

"I'll keep digging until I find out the truth."

She shook her head.

"You mean that."

"Yes, damn it, I do," Gibbs let his anger sharpen his tone.

It had no effect on Hollis. He should have known it wouldn't. Hollis had been an excellent officer and made it look effortless. She wasn't going to jump because an ex-gunny raised his voice.

"That's why no one will trust you with a higher clearance than you already have, not even on a case by case basis," Hollis told him, diamond clear and cold enough to shrivel his balls. "The cult of Gibbs is losing its shine."

He didn't run a cult. She was being ridiculous. He'd amassed plenty of enemies over the years, and he didn't even mean the shoot-at-you kind. Despite his disdain for them, he knew political animals could bite too.

Hollis walked past him. Gibbs decided to try one last time to push her into telling him what he wanted. "Whatever dirty business O'Neill's running with these people, I will find it out."

Hollis didn't pause or even turn. "You can stomp your feet and have a hissy fit, but all it's going to get you is a short trip to small cell for you and any of your team stupid enough to break the law for you this time."
"Phillipe," Daniel greeted the other archaeologist. Phillipe Valtallon had never been a close friend and barely even a colleague, but he hadn't joined in the feeding frenzy of others who had destroyed Daniel's first career. Now Daniel wasn't quite the pariah he'd been when the Stargate Program recruited him. Time had provided other scandals: thefts, frauds, destruction. What was one man with crazy ideas compared to those? Especially when he must have landed on his feet working for the military. Whispers of linguists and anthropologists and archaeologists finding jobs with the US Defense Department, of classified work and cushy government grants, all said the man to get on the right side of was Daniel Jackson.

When Phillipe had come to him it hadn't been in search of funding or a job.


"How have you been?" Daniel asked.

They took seats at a table outside the café – chosen for its Turkish coffee made with long-handled copper pots and served in fincan with a cold-water palate cleanser on the side -- and talked politely while their order was prepared.

Phillipe rocked his flattened hand to indicate good and bad, then shrugged. "I appreciated the security measures that appeared at the site."

Daniel shrugged. Phillipe's site was associated with Mari, but not part of it or well-publicized. There had been little to no funding and excavation. Lucky for them or the Syrian war would have brought destruction to it, the way it had Palmyra, Mari, the Mar Elian Monastery, Apamea and Dur-Europos.

Daniel had dropped a word in the right ears. Jack would throw a fit that could be seen from Pegasus if he knew who that was. In fact, Jack would throw a fit if he knew Daniel was in Paris.

"The contractors were tight-lipped in regard to who hired them, but I understand it was Farrow-Marshall?" Phillipe looked curious. "Are they not a tech company?"

"With defense contracts."

Phillipe looked puzzled. "But why would they hire private security – "

Mercenaries, Daniel knew he meant.

" – to safeguard an archaeological site?"

Daniel shrugged to indicate he had no details. "The CEO was upset to hear that the Temple of Baal had been bulldozed." Jack had laughed when Daniel complained to him about the destruction. That was what had given Daniel the idea to send 'Kevin Balim' the information on Phillipe's dig site and the danger the temple there was in.
Ba'al's ego had done the rest.

Daniel had supped with the devil before. He knew how to use a long spoon.

"I'm grateful, but still curious, I admit," Phillipe said. "So how can I help you today?"

"I don't know if you can," Daniel told him.

"But I will if I can."

Phillipe was so earnest Daniel had to smile. He remembered believing everything was so simple once. Now he manipulated alien monsters to thwart human ones and couldn't tell who was worse.

"If you can."

He turned his empty fincan absently. What would the cold grounds predict for his future if he could read them?

"You curated a collection belonging to Mir Esfandyar Khorasani a few years ago," Daniel began.

"I began a partial inventory," Phillipe interrupted. His body language had stiffened. "I withdrew when I began to suspect much of the collection had been acquired illegally."

Daniel had suspected that might be the case. Phillipe might accept mercenaries protecting a priceless dig site, but he wouldn't trade a clod of dirt from it for that protection.

"Probably," he agreed with Phillipe. "I'm hoping you remember if he had a small stone tablet – "

"More than one," Phillipe interrupted wryly and they both laughed. "You'd need to be more specific, not to mention explaining why?"

Daniel pulled up a picture of an Ancient document on his phone. It didn't contain any useful information though it was a large enough sample to provide clues to grammar and punctuation. He turned it, so Phillipe could see and then they maneuvered so the sun wasn't blinding off the screen.

"The joys of technology," Phillipe commented.

Daniel just shrugged because he'd learned to appreciate technology in his years with the SGC, both Earth's and the Ancients'. Even Goa'uld tech – zat stuns were better than being shot. He could speak to that from experience.

"Oh, this."

He perked up. "You've seen something with writing like that?"

Phillipe handed him the phone back. "Tell me why you want to know? You don't participate in digs, you don't have a professorship anywhere I know of, and you haven't published in a decade. You do something for the military. Why would the military care about dusty old pot shards?"

Daniel couldn't tell him the truth, but he could tell him a truth. Just a different one and spin a story from that. He'd constructed it with Jack's help over beer and pizza in Jack's DC penthouse.

"You'd be surprised," he said honestly. He still had a little water left and sipped it before launching his story. "It's the US Air Force, actually, and they're interested in not building a temporary base on an archaeological gold mine. They're not all Philistines – " Not even Jack, despite his penchant for pretending to be a dumb thug. " – but even if they were, they're aware of bad publicity and the costs
of moving an airfield are astounding."

Phillipe's brow wrinkled in disgust. "Your same military that wouldn't want to bomb a hospital or historical site 'accidentally'?

Daniel grimaced at the reminder of too many 'accidentally on purpose' actions. It went with the 'better to ask forgiveness than permission' mentality fostered by commanders more interested in cover your ass and careers than taking responsibility. Phillipe wasn't wrong. It just wasn't everyone in the military. Academia was no better in his experience; military officers were probably less likely to stab their colleagues in the back – metaphorically – than professors feuding over funding.

"No, they employ me for my linguistics work," Daniel said. "I hate PR. But that was an example of how archaeology and the military can intersect."

"But not why you are pursuing a tablet with this writing. I have never identified where this alphabet originated."

"Neither have I," Daniel lied. "And I probably won't."

"So, why the interest?"

"A favor."

"The world runs on favors," Phillipe agreed. Favors and nepotism and mordida all greased the gears. Civilization was a vast network of needs and wants administered by human beings. Humans did better for those they knew and liked than for strangers.

"You know how Da'ash takes a cut from looters?" Daniel would have used Al-Dawla Al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham instead if they had been anywhere in the Middle East except Israel, but then he'd have been speaking Arabic instead of French. Jack got put out if Daniel called them the Islamic State and Daniel understood: it legitimized and recognized the extremists. He'd probably made a terrible mistake drawing Ba'al's attention to them.

"Yes."

"A smaller group has been funding themselves with items from an undocumented site. Most of it isn't distinct enough to follow back –"

"But this writing is."

Phillipe had followed the implication that Daniel was working for an intelligence agency, hunting terrorists, just the way Daniel had hoped he would. Phillipe would have no problem helping because he hated looters. In the sense Homeworld gathered intelligence and the Goa'uld were terrifying, it was all true anyway.

"If Khorasani has a tablet with this writing, then my friends will know to look at who sold it to him and hopefully trace it back to where it came from." Daniel gestured with open hands. "They might even be willing to protect the site to stop the funding. You know looters are nearly as destructive as bulldozers."

"Khorasani doesn't have it any longer, but he did," Phillipe said.

Daniel did his best not to look too excited. "Do you know who he sold it to?"
"Emil Bonmarie."

"You're sure?"

"Very much so. I documented the sale of the tablet. I have copies of photographs taken as part of the purchase."

Daniel signaled the waiter for more coffee. "I'll let my friend know that it was sold to Khorasani." He wouldn't, because there was no friend and no stolen antiquities conduit. Or, there were, many, but Daniel wasn't involved with tracing the money that moved through them. He was after a copy of a tablet Myrrdin had hidden.

"Now that's out of the way, care to indulge me? I would love to see the pictures and compare them to what I have."

Not a lie at all.

Of course, he'd do his best to get Jack to leverage a deal that obtained the tablet itself from Monsieur Bonmarie, but if Phillipe had pictures, Daniel wanted to see them. For the rest of the afternoon, he allowed himself to forget why it was so desperately important to find the Sangraal and any other anti-Ascendant weapons and forgot himself in talking with Phillipe about lost languages and the difficulties of inferring pronunciation when there were no descendant languages.

It was a shame he couldn't tell Phillipe how truly awful Daniel's accent in Ancient turned out to be after reaching Atlantis and hearing samples of spoken Alteran from its archives. It wasn't something he'd share with Jack or anyone under the Mountain.
Remember, this is an AU. For one thing, I'm pretty sure we've never had a President Henry Hayes (Rutherford B., yeah, but no Henry.) In this AU, Don't Ask, Don't Tell remains in place, and the glass ceiling has been reinforced. Thought I'd mention that, because it's so easy to read and think 'but that's not true anymore'. Being a cynic, I suspect nothing is quite as utopic as TPTB would like us to think anyway.

Jack

Jack watched Malcolm Barrett the way he'd watch someone's pet python. The NID agent had arrived unannounced at his office. Jack had told Sgt. Farah Cho to clear his appointments until noon. She'd eyed Barrett with even less fondness than Jack: he was screwing up Farah's carefully crafted schedule, which didn't just fuck her day, but the rest of the week too as she worked to reschedule the morning's appointments.

Sgt. Cho had exquisite hygiene, perfect teeth, nice breath, and was in excellent health. She could kick the ass of a Marine twice her body weight. She ran Jack's office with an efficiency that would have made Frederick Winslow Taylor weep. Jack himself was very careful not to cross her or let anyone else poach her. But he vowed he wouldn't drink any coffee she made for the rest of the day; he knew she'd find something nastier than spit to add to it if Barrett accepted a cup.

She might just brew it with his driver Corporal Detweiler's athletic cup. Then again, Sgt. Cho's abuela was a Texican bruja. She probably knew something tasteless that would give Barrett the runs for a week and permanent BO if he hung around long enough to mess up a second appointment.

Jack would bring her flowers if she figured out a way to repel NID entirely, and Barrett wasn't even the worst of them. At least they hadn't sent Merrick. If Jack had still been in the business of setting up 'accidents' for enemy agents, he might have practiced on Merrick.

"Coffee?" Sgt. Cho asked stoically after she'd opened the door to Jack's office for Barrett.

"Barrett?" Jack asked and added, "Can't have any myself. My doc told me to cut back at my last check-up."

"No, thanks," Barrett said with a friendly nod toward Sgt. Cho. "I know I'm throwing your schedule off, so I'm going to keep this as short as possible."

Smart man. If he wasn't NID, Jack might even have liked that about him.

Sgt. Cho shut the door behind her.

"What's up?" Jack asked, swallowing the Doc that always sprang to his lips.

"A mess in Paris," Barrett replied. He took a USB drive from his pocket and handed it to Jack.
"Who does NID care about in Paris and why tell me?"

"An archaeologist. Phillipe Valtallon. Up until last month he'd been working a site in Syria."

"Never heard of him, but a Frenchman working in Syria right now has to be off his rocker."

"It was a sister site to the one in Palmyra ISIL destroyed."

"Still not seeing why you're here," Jack said, but he had a bad feeling. It was an archaeologist, after all, so it had to be something involving Danny. Christ, what had he done now? Which wasn't fair to Daniel, who had saved them from more threats than he'd ever brought to Earth's door, but Jack was so tired of cleaning up messes.

Barrett held up his hand. "Two things."

Jack braced himself.

"Valtallon's site was linked to the Temple of Baal and he managed to continue working in Syria because a company of 'security' mercenaries was hired to guard it."

Fuck.

"Fuck." Jack took a deep breath and blew it out. His muscles stayed tight enough that his back began to ache. "Who paid them?"

"The money came from a Farrow-Marshall slush fund."

Homeworld would have to put together an op to determine if Ba'al was just fucking with them or there really was something worth protecting and finding at the dig site. In goddamn Syria, in the middle of a war the US was at least paying lip service to not interfering with.

Sgt. Cho would have the extra strength aspirin for migraines. (or “migraine-strength aspirin”)

"Two things, you said."

Barrett took a deep breath. "Daniel's fingerprints have been identified at Valtallon's apartment and there's a security camera that shows someone that might be him – "

Jack held his hand up. "When was this Valley guy killed?"

"He's on video going into his building at nine Paris time. The man they think is Daniel goes in an hour later, which matches the French coroner's time of death."

"Paris is six hours ahead of DC. Danny was at that mind-numbing briefing with the President and the head of the Joint Chiefs about the shoot-out in London and the Pegasus problem from three until five. Weir and I were there too." He glared at Barrett. "If the NID wants to frame him, they better be willing to call the Commander in Chief a liar. Even Asgard beaming can't put someone two places at once."

"Not me," Barrett said. "I'll pass the information along to Interpol through the proper channels. The fingerprints must be old."

"Must be."

Or planted, Jack thought darkly.
"Thanks for your time, General."

"Always glad to help out the NID," Jack lied.

Barrett chuckled but didn't call him on that. Jack waved him on his way with a sardonic smile.

Danny had commandeered the Daedalus to beam him to Paris yesterday, but he had come back in time for the briefing. Even if Jack hadn't known his alibi was ironclad, he still wouldn't buy Danny murdering someone. This scenario had been tried before, for cryin' out loud.

But he and Danny were going to be have a long talk about why Danny was in Paris when an archaeologist with ties to Ba'al was there and why this Valtallon ended up dead. If it wasn't just the world's stupidest frame job.

The attempted frame worried Jack, though. It felt like a move in a game he hadn't realized was being played. The action in London had been attributed to either the Lucian Alliance or the Trust – it wasn't byzantine enough to be Ba'al. Four dead marines plus however many Jaffa and Pegasan security Mal Doran's people had 'disappeared' were a shame, but the effort had been doomed. The Pegasan party had been ready; Mal Doran knew how the Goa'uld thought and operated, while McKay and Sheppard could predict how Earth's forces would jump.

It made them a scary prospect as an enemy. Jack was damned glad they wanted what Earth had enough to come to them but were ethical enough to not come and try to just take it. Which had likely been Mal Doran's first plan.

For the moment he didn't have to worry about Mal Doran's intentions. She was never going to want to subjugate Earth. It would be too much like work.

No, Jack had to worry about who had known about Phillipe Valtallon, and why he had been killed. There would be a reason beyond the frame. If they simply wanted Daniel to look guilty of something, the victim could have been random rather than someone who revealed a connection to Ba'al.

He'd been carefully feeding all his suspected moles information about the Pegasans, their tech, and where they'd be, and watching for where that information turned up. Listening to the DC gossip. Waiting until he had his ducks in a row to open fire from ambush…

Danny wasn't part of that plan, damn it. Danny was hunting Ancient texts that might offer a clue to finding a weapon against the Ori.

The two did not intersect.

Or should not.

Someone in the SGC was dirty, someone Jack hadn't pegged. Someone who knew that Danny had gone from the Mountain to France… But not about the DC briefing with the President.

He should be grateful: whoever it was had just stumbled and given their presence away. But the prospect of a second mole hunt filled Jack with exhaustion. Homeworld would catch whoever Ba'al had inserted, but that success would camouflage the other player, had probably been doing just that all along.

The enemy of my enemy is not my friend, but the perfect sucker to blame.

Christ, he missed the days when George headed the SGC, Hayes was in office, the IOA was
someone else's problem, and the Goa'uld were the worst thing he had to face. The good old days, Jack mused, the golden era of the Stargate Program. He knew better, but life had been easier when he had McKay's brains and paranoia on his side or Sam's loyal brilliance along with Teal'c stoic support, all of them right at his side, guarding his back and Earth.

They'd wasted McKay and practically thrown Carter away. Training up Haley to take their place had been hell and now he had a report in hand that said she wasn't dead: she was the Orici spearheading the second Prior incursion. That was information that needed to stay within the SGC if Hank Landry hadn't already spilled it from Beijing to Moscow.

Hell, who was Jack kidding? He'd rather the Chinese and Russians know than the Beltway piranhas.

He got up and went to the door rather than mess with the intercom system.

"Sergeant," he said, "I'll be lunching in. Think you can rustle up something for both us? And find some aspirin. The NID always gives me a headache."

"You have a conference call with Ms. Mann at one-thirty and another with Director Weir at two," Sgt. Cho reminded him.

"Aspirin, Farah, please."

"I'll get you the good coffee and a mufaletta from the new sandwich place."

"You are pearl beyond price, Sergeant Cho."

She smiled at him and ruthlessly informed him, "You have a breakfast meeting with Charlotte Mayfield tomorrow, since you cancelled your appointment today."

"If you were going to poison Barrett, just give it to me instead," Jack joked.

"I would never poison you, sir," she assured him. Her mouth twitched with a suppressed smile. Sergeant Cho's secret sense of humor wasn't why Jack kept her on, but it was why he liked her. "But I make no promises otherwise."

"Make sure you get something for yourself too," he said and waited until he heard her leave before locking his door and switching on the bug zapper. He had complete faith in Sergeant Cho, but that didn't mean he would trust her unnecessarily.

He called Mitchell. Truthfully, he might trust Cho more than Cameron Mitchell, but Mitchell already knew what Jack wanted to talk about.

"General," Mitchell greeted his call with the caution of a man smarter than he looked. "New job for you."

"Something else I can't tell anyone about?" Now Mitchell sounded tired. He hadn't enlisted to play spy games. Counter-intelligence didn't come naturally to him. He liked people. He wanted to believe the best of them and fly very fast aircraft. Jack remembered the same feeling about the aircraft part; he'd never been that fond of people.

Jack took his yoyo out of his desk and began fooling with it. Occupying his hands soothed him. He needed something; he didn't go on missions, didn't even get to the gym often enough to combat middle-age spread. His doctor had more complaints than just his caffeine intake.
"I'm afraid so, Colonel."

Mitchell muffled a groan. "Hit me."

"Danny beamed to France yesterday."

"And… "

"Find out who at the Mountain knew, because the man he met was killed last night, and if Caldwell hadn't beamed Danny back for the White House debriefing, Interpol would be looking at him for murder. Someone went to the trouble of looking like him and leaving his fingerprints, according to NID Agent Barrett."

Mitchell groaned again. "Fucking NID."

Jack agreed.

"You sure it's someone at the Mountain?"

"If it was someone on Daedalus, they'd know their frame time-frame wouldn't work." Not to mention it was easier to monitor all communications to and from the ship than from the Mountain.

"Isn't this what the NID is supposed to do?"

"Do you trust the NID?" Jack asked.

"I can nose around, but the minute I start asking questions your leak is going to clam up. Enlisted aren't going to talk to me and the scientists all hate my guts since we lost Haley."

Mitchell coughed to camouflage his voice breaking. Jack let him have a moment to pull himself together. Losing one of your team felt like losing a piece of yourself; he'd found that out with McKay and he hadn't even liked the man. Losing them and finding them taken over, turned or mind-controlled or enslaved by a Goa'uld – the universe didn't lack in horrors to inflict – was exponentially worse.

"Daniel would be better," Mitchell said. "At least he might know who was around to hear about his little expedition."

"He has more important things to handle."

Mitchell sighed.

"Keep Teal'c with you to watch your back," Jack advised. He wished to hell he could have Teal'c watching his back, but the battles Jack faced in DC he had to fight alone.

"Teal'c's great, but he's not exactly a spy hunter," Mitchell said.

Jack had to admit that was true. "Look, put together a list, then fly out to LA. There's a woman there, Hetty Lange: she's going to show you pictures of some people. If you recognize anyone, you let me know. No one else, not even her."

"Okay, but – "

"I'll ask her to walk you through how you nail down a leak when there's a limited pool of possible suspects."
"Yes, sir."

"Don't let me down, Mitchell."

"What about General Landry, sir?"

"Tell him to call me."

"Yes, sir," Mitchell replied with all the enthusiasm of a depressed sloth. Jack had just stuck him between two superior officers. Even worse than a rock and a hard place, since you could take dynamite to those.

He let the yoyo drop and reeled it one last time, then put it and his bug zapper away.

Jack picked up his phone. Of course, he already knew who was calling. Her secretary or aide had made the call that had come through Farah Cho's screening.

"Elizabeth," he greeted the civilian director of the Stargate Program.

"Jack," she said his name with a load of annoyance but not hostility. They mostly got along these days, united in working around Hank Landry's increasing intransigence.

"What can I do for you, Liz?"

"Stop calling me that and stop poaching SGC personnel for your ops. I just had Hank ranting at me for twenty minutes that you'd tapped SG-1 for something. Again. And Interpol is snooping around about Daniel. What the hell is going on?"

"Barrett should take care of the Interpol thing by the end of the day," Jack told her. "They were looking at Danny for a murder in Paris, but he's got a pretty good alibi."

"How good?" Elizabeth demanded suspiciously.

"You, me, the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the President."

Finally, she laughed. "Well... I guess that will do." He heard paper shuffling and a sigh. "Is Mitchell part of that?"

"Only tangentially."

"And you aren't going to point me in the direction of your tangent."

"Not yet."

"It isn't the Pegasans?"

"No."

"Good. I can probably unruffle Hank's feathers as long as it doesn't involve Captain Mal Doran."

Jack chuckled. She might be a pain in his ass, but he had thoroughly enjoyed watching Vala Mal Doran and Teyla Emmagan hand the IOA its ass at the negotiating table. Hank had nearly stroked
out a couple of times.

"He's becoming a problem."

"Not yet."

"You don't have to deal with him every day."

Jack acknowledged that, but Hank Landry was doing exactly what Jack had expected he would. Personal feelings aside, Landry was a competent officer. He was playing footsie with the IOA in a way Jack couldn't have pulled off with his history of hostility toward them. It was all a part of defending the SGC's authority against encroachments. Landry wasn't power-hungry, but he wouldn't let anyone mess with his personal fiefdom. He wasn't too smart, but he was smart enough to grasp the facts when they were presented to him, and usually not too petty toward his subordinates. He wasn't a coward or a desk jockey who had never seen combat.

Landry was just mediocre.

Putting him in as head of the SGC had made its enemies happy, because Landry wasn't a buddy of Jack's or a protégé of George's.

Landry hadn't had to contend with their enemies in the establishment. It had let him do better by the SGC than anyone had expected.

"No, but I have to make our Commander in Chief happy. And Hank Landry does that, so suck it up," Jack said. He hadn't bothered with the bug zapper. He wasn't going to say anything anyone could use, and neither was Elizabeth. She just needed to gripe to someone with equal clearances.

"Well, try not to piss him off again for a while, Jack," Elizabeth said. "I'm starting to buy those giant bottles of aspirin a little too often."

"Hey," he said, "if you want to get up Hank's nose a little, there's a woman named Gant. Hire her."

"Why?"

"Steven Caldwell says she was a damn fine officer. Hank got her a blue ticket – "

"What?"

"She's a lesbian. Landry got her discharged for that." He'd used slang from the nineteen-forties. Caldwell had managed to get Gant out on a general discharge and not an undesirable, which was what the US military used instead of 'blue tickets'. But down at the bone, it was the same: tossing good people just for their sexual preference.

"You're still doing that?"

"Hayes never managed to push through any amendments to the UCMJ," Jack said. "It's shit." But it was still the rule. Good officers ignored it as much as possible. Gant got screwed because Hank was pissed at Caldwell for something. Daedalus had more women officers than other ships – Caldwell had taken them when other commanders found excuses.

"Why am I not surprised?" Elizabeth muttered. "What's her name?"

"Erin Gant," Jack replied. He had the rest of the information on her memorized as well and relayed it to Elizabeth. He had a feeling Hank was going to have to bite his tongue when Elizabeth
presented him with her new aide.

"Sometimes you’re all right, Jack."

Jack allowed himself a tiny smile. It was so satisfying to do something good and get in a petty dig at a dumbass at the same time. It made up a little for the silence on Jennifer Kim.

"Shhh. Don't tell anyone."

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Deeks

"Mr. Deeks, Ms. Jones, please come with me," Hetty said. Sam looked interested, Callen narrowed his eyes and Kensi almost said something, but a gimlet-eyed look from Hetty shut her up.

Marty checked the time on his laptop screen. 11.14 am. Lunch meeting. Hetty liked to multi-task. She'd have lunch somewhere nicer than he'd dreamed existed as a kid, she'd meet with a contact, and she'd introduce her protégé to said contact, all at the same time. Him? Marty wasn't so sure why she'd want him along. The LAPD connection? His law degree or his ability to sit somewhere and fade into the background of California blond actor wannabes and surfer dudes?

If she wanted muscle, she'd have tapped Sam.

Or maybe she just wanted a driver.

The armored Mercedes had come from a narcotrafficante's garage, confiscated when OSP took him down as a bonus in a thwarted arms transaction. The man had kept six of them, each identical except for the license plates, and choose which one to ride in at random each day.

Hetty and Nell rode in the back while Marty drove, weaving through the dense LA traffic and practicing his counter-surveillance and evasion techniques. Nell had her laptop open on her knees and was checking the vehicle's computer systems for electronic ticks while Marty made sure they didn't have anyone physically on their tail. Eric or someone equally skilled and dialed-in could follow them via traffic cams and satellite, but Marty knew a few tricks to counter those too.

He babbled and joked and played the dork in the office and with his team mates. Nobody worried about someone who was the butt of the jokes, in his experience. The OSP team knew his specialty was undercover, deep cover that he'd maintained and lived over years, like 'Max Gentry'. He'd been under as a dirty real estate lawyer when they first tangled. But they didn't realize how much of his office persona was a mask.

Oh, Callan and Kensi and Sam knew he was competent. They trusted him at their backs. Kensi loved him and Marty loved her, they were this close to putting a ring on it, and she knew more about him than anyone – except Hetty, who probably knew more than he did -- but sometimes he didn't think Kensi knew him. That's when he got scared and joked harder, playing the fool more intently.

Cold feet.

Not usually a problem in sunny Southern California, he mocked himself, but he knew love wasn't always enough. Love could be a poison that crippled, the way it had paralyzed his mother for years after his father turned into a monster.
Marty always thought of it that way: Gordon John Brandel had turned into a monster. He hadn't always been one. Roberta wouldn't have fallen in love with or married him if he had been.

He checked Nell and Hetty in the rearview mirror, glad for the dark sunglasses that hid his eyes even though the dark mood that had overtaken him showed in his expression, especially the downturn of his mouth. If asked he’d blame it on a headache from the sun-glare off the ocean of glass and chrome and shining paint jobs that was an LA week day road trip.

Hetty finally supplied an address in Orange County. Marty calculated a route that would shake anyone on their tail and get them there by a quarter after noon, and one that would have them arrive on time along with anyone still hanging on behind them.

"With or without a tail?" he asked.

"Without, please," Hetty replied.

"Even Beale's eyes in the skies?"

"Yes, if you please." He could hear something suspiciously like satisfaction in her voice.

He goosed the gas pedal with a grin. "Buckle up, ladies."

"Drive it like you're still making payments on it, Mr. Deeks," Hetty advised him primly and Nell giggled. Hetty pursed her lips, but Marty knew her eyes were bright with amusement behind her glasses.

Hetty's contact turned out to be a handsome man in his late thirties, wearing casual civilian clothes and carrying a concealed handgun. His dark brown hair was worn in a short, bland cut. Squint crinkles at the corners of his eyes, the way he clocked everyone on the veranda where they were seated, and his unconsciously straight posture marked him as some variety of current or former military. Marty wasn't surprised when he was introduced as Colonel Mitchell, USAF.

Mitchell turned on the Southern charm for Nell and offered a friendly handshake to Marty. His hand had gun calluses just like Marty' own. He might be a flyboy, but combined with lunching with Hetty, those calluses told Marty that Mitchell was some kind of operator. Despite that, he came across as a genuine, amiable guy, probably a hell of a lot smarter than he acted too.

Marty knew about that.

"I guess I'm here to look at some pictures," Mitchell said.

Nell opened her laptop and displayed surveillance photos of the CEO, CFO and COO of Quindozum Enterprises. They were good, color close-ups taken with a zoom lens. Marty had taken several of them.

Mitchell didn't look at them long. His expression didn't change. He looked back at Hetty instead and said, "Okay."

"That's it?" Nell asked.

Hetty smiled and patted her hand. "Silence is golden."

Marty hid a smile of his own behind his hand. Their meals came and they all ate. He was a little surprised Mitchell hadn't booked it; he'd clearly been sent to confirm something for Hetty; he'd only have spoken up if the Quindozum three weren't people he recognized. Then Hetty began
talking.

Some of what she spoke about Marty already understood, but he mostly understood it from either an undercover operative's context or a police investigation. Hetty was giving Mitchell and Nell—and him, but he knew it was mainly for those two—a one-woman master's symposium on counterintelligence and how to conduct a mole hunt. Hearing the ways to narrow down the suspect field and then flush out a leak explained so objectively caught Marty's interest; trying to dig out the mole in OSP had been dishearteningly personal.

Mitchell's attention to Hetty never wavered. He hadn't just been sent to confirm something but to learn this from Hetty. Mitchell wasn't a molehunter, he was a field guy, but whoever sent him trusted him where he didn't trust the people he would normally set after the varmints.

The colonel gravely thanked Hetty at the end of the meal and said he'd enjoyed meeting Nell and Marty and wished he could stay longer, but, "I've got to get back to the Mountain."

"Cheyenne Mountain?" Nell asked curiously.


Nell's fingers drifted across the keys of her laptop. She frowned slightly, gaze flickering from her screen to Mitchell. "But you're drawing hazard pay."

Mitchell grinned, all white teeth and amusement, not even pretending that Deep Space Radar Telemetry wasn't cover for something else.

Marty glanced at Hetty and thought she knew what it was. Owl-eyed and solemn as their own Pythia, Hetty gave nothing away, yet Marty knew her silence was as much a confirmation as Mitchell's had been.

Jennifer Kim

She didn't know where she was being held. It might not even be within the US; they operated multiple black sites worldwide. They'd bagged her head through the trip.

The cell was marginally better than her previous prisons; it was cleaner, there was a foam pad on the concrete shelf that comprised her bed, a flushing toilet, and a sink with running water. The food was tasteless and starchy, but sufficient for a non-active existence. It was newer: it had cameras in all corners of the cell, microphones, soundproofing, forced air through vents too small even for a child to crawl through. Showers twice a week, under guard. The walls and floor were all painted with a thick, rubbery white latex. Light came through the entire ceiling, which was too high for her to reach. The locks on all the doors were electronic and required keycards and passcodes.

She'd listened to the rhythms of the passcodes when they were typed in. Either they changed even the number of digits or the guards were messing with her. Either showed a frightening level of forethought.

There was no escape from this facility. Not without outside intervention and Jennifer had no one that would be coming for her. O'Neill had been blunt when he recruited her. She was expendable.

Even if she'd completely succeeded in her mission, O'Neill would not have exposed himself to help
her.

Like many prisoners, she mined her past experiences to combat the lack of mental stimulus. She
remembered things from childhood that had settled beneath other memories. People she'd known.
Books she'd read, movies she'd seen, music in extraordinary detail. She could close her eyes and
hear her mother's voice. It made her wish she'd had more time and a chance to get to know
Granger.

Solitary confinement preyed on the mind. The cell, with only her own noises, made it even worse.

Jennifer spent a lot of her time thinking of everything she'd done, every choice she'd made,
torturing herself with what ifs. But as the weeks passed she'd turned to meditation instead, and
found a peace she hadn't expected.

She didn't break herself against the solitude the way many people did, didn't mentally implode.

It irked her jailors. Jennifer would have held onto her sanity for the small pleasure that provided,
even if she hadn't wanted it for herself.

It was quite possible she would die in this place, but she wouldn't give herself up.

The interrogations had been routine up to now. Questions she'd already answered, couldn't or
refused to, rephrased and repeated in the hope she would slip. None of them were the right
questions to uncover what O'Neill had briefed her on. The questions provided Jennifer with more
information than they elicited from her.

The beatings were nasty, but calculated: nothing that couldn't be recovered from without medical
intervention. She endured and used the anger and the pain to fortify herself.

If she had to vomit, she did her best to do it on her interrogators. The same with blood and snot.

She saved smearing her cell with feces for if she ever had to ascertain she wasn't being returned to
the same cell. It wasn't a tactic worth using unless she started to doubt her own recognition.
Marking the cell was nearly impossible and the twenty-four hour surveillance meant anything she
managed could be duplicated, but no matter how it was cleaned, that smell would linger. She
would know if they moved her. Just knowing she could exert that much control helped her hold
onto herself.

Jennifer pissed on the one guard that decided he would rape her between the interrogation room
and the cell. His revulsion effectively turned him off and he didn't dare tune her up, since the same
surveillance on the cell would reveal any damage he did.

She suspected the halls were also monitored. That guard never returned, and a clean jumpsuit
arrived with her morning meal the next day. No doubt her interrogators just didn't want to smell
urine all day.

The break in routine interested and frightened Jennifer. She knew the fear was both warranted and
a result of the regimented routine of incarceration. Imprisonment encouraged learned helplessness.
She'd learned that during her training in resisting interrogation, but there was a chasm between
theory and practice that she wished she'd never crossed.

Instead of the chilly interrogation room with its audio and visual recording systems and practical,
terrifying floor drain, two guards marched her down a different hallway, into an elevator, and up.
They delivered her to an office and left her, withdrawing outside, instructing her, "Don't fuck with
Agent Barrett."
Jennifer's attention immediately went to the window. She hadn't seen the outside world for months; just the sun on a patch of scraggly grass and a nondescript bird hopping over it was enough to catch her breath in her throat. She wanted to plaster herself to window, to absorb even a moment of that sunshine on her skin, to watch that little brown bird until it flew away.

"Jennifer Kim."

Her focus snapped back to the room. A tall, lean man stood to the side of the room's desk. She knew immediately it wasn't his desk, nor was the office his. It had been commandeered.

"You haven't cooperated," he said. "You're stubborn. Defiant." He drawled out the last word, made it amused and contemptuous at once.

Jennifer shuddered. This man was nothing like her previous interrogators.

He walked towards her. There was something wrong with the way he moved, it was too smooth, too poised, an act. She didn't move. She felt like a mouse being stalked. He stopped right in front of her and skimmed his fingers over her cheek.

"Pretty."

She froze up like a mouse mesmerized by a snake. He had a jewel in the palm of his hand, red, glowing, hot where it touched her skin.

"Who are you?" Jennifer whispered.

He smiled. "Tell me about Jack O'Neill's plans. What else did you do for him?"

His eyes flared white.

Jennifer began to scream even before the pain came. She screamed from terror and horror and because screaming kept her from speaking.

The bird outside the window was startled into flight and she was left alone with the Goa'uld.
"You know how bad sand and dust is for my electronics," Mer complained, but it was pro forma. Everyone would worry if he didn't. Teyla and Vala were used to it and ignored him.

Jehan nodded. "We know." He wasn't a fan of the Middle East either, though Egypt was far from Afghanistan. Sand did suck. But Teyla wanted to see more than just the West so they'd all decamped from London in the aftermath of Am-heh's attack. And the Mena House Oberoi in the Giza District of Cairo was hardly dusty.

He sipped his coffee and gazed past the gardens to the pyramids. They'd planned to walk to the Sphinx tomorrow, but the new security contingent, not to mention the hotel management, worried so much they'd agreed to take vehicles.

No one needed to know Revenge was in cloaked orbit and ready to beam them out of any trouble on a split second's notice. Aurora was on equal alert, monitoring the QE crew on world.

"I am glad we came here," Teyla remarked. "London and New York were… interesting, but very much alike to me."

"It's not like Cairo is some Podunk town," Mer pointed out contrarily.

Jehan had wondered if Egypt would trigger bad associations for the three of them. But they all found the Mena House pleasing. Vala and Teyla were both more comfortable here than they'd been at the Dorchester.

Between his rusty Arabic, the French he and Mer both had, and Vala summoning Qetesh’s version of ancient Egyptian, they were getting along without resorting to translators. Their Maltese passports meant less worries over anti-Western reactions, which also helped. Even Mer's Canadian nationality didn't stir up the same hostility being American might have.

"No, but the people here seem to be much more open." Teyla was getting her first taste of a culture outside the West. On the surface, Egypt probably seemed more like Pegasus. She wouldn't take it on face value, but she didn't share Jehan and Mer's unconscious cultural bias.

"It's a different culture," Jehan said.

Another reason they'd come to Cairo: Zelenka wanted Mer to join him while he met with several potential recruits Quindozum Enterprises had contacted. Novak and Miko were willing to put up with them, but if they couldn't handle Mer's brand of interpersonal relations, they couldn't handle living and working in another galaxy. Officially Mer was showing up to prove Quindozum was working with science beyond what anyone else had, but in fact the meeting would be a personality evaluation. Haemi would be accompanying them.

Jehan smiled as the Aurora contingent arrived and joined them on the terrace. It was early enough that the day's heat hadn't developed yet and everyone was enjoying the warm air. One thing they all appreciated was breathing non-recycled air while on planet. Even when it stank of exhaust fumes and fertilizer and cooking fires, it was rich and fragrant with life. The mingled perfume of jasmine and the coffee service arranged on the table completed the experience.

Despite being in contact through their ships, everyone had to touch upon meeting. A squeeze to a
forearm, a brush of fingers to a shoulder, a hug from Novak to a flustered Mer, and Athosian forehead touches between most of them. Used to the tight quarters of life on a ship – even Aurora wasn't exactly spacious inside – they ended up sitting close enough to brush knees and elbows.

Miko smiled at Jehan and he grinned back at her. "How's it going?" he asked, though he'd been getting reports.

"We may have picked up some attention in Los Angeles," she said.

"Enough to cause problems?"

Her smile turned wicked. "Our warehouses are empty. Our bills are paid. What have we done? Why so suspicious of seeds and silk?" She broke and giggled at the idea.

Jehan laughed with her. The adorable kitten was still adorable, but she was a lioness now, as was with Lindsay. He missed having them on Revenge.

Of course, Aurora's on-Earth team and the corporation they'd formed with laundered money were acquiring a lot more than agricultural implements. Quindozen Enterprises had been quietly purchasing everything on Atlantis' 'want' list. They weren't going to wait for the IOA to okay any of it.

Occasionally capitalism had its benefits. No one cared who they were selling to. No one asked why Quindozen Enterprises wanted everything they needed to set up their own pharmaceutical manufacturing arm from seed to product. Or supplies to run a large hospital for years. Or industrial looms, sewing machines, machine shops, well-drilling outfits, and factories worth of other infrastructure equipment. Quindozen Enterprises paid up-front. Once they took delivery without problems, the companies selling to them moved on to the next customer.

Recruiting people to go to Pegasus and Atlantis or as ship crew, at the risk of their lives and with little likelihood of ever returning to Earth, was much more difficult.

The Expedition members had put their heads together to make lists of people who hadn't come with them, people who they thought would do well but hadn't been approached by the SGC. The Expedition had technically been multinational; members came from countries that were part of the IOA. But it had still been firmly skewed to the First World. Security clearances had excluded many better qualified scientists.

The difficulty lay in figuring out who truly didn't belong and who had been ignored or denied clearance for specious and prejudicial reasons.

Finding trustworthy ex-military personnel was harder. Mercenaries would be a no-go. They didn't need a repeat of Kel.

"We're making better progress now that we have an informal network bringing us names," Lindsay said. "I found a woman one of Caldwell's officers told me about – "

"Your military dismissed her because she is lesbian," Miko added.

"Good officer?" asked Jehan.

"Very, I think," Radek said. "Experience aboard a ship too."

"And you got her?" Mer asked.
"We did, as of three days ago. And Gant knows others the Stargate Program and your military has thrown away for similar reasons." Radek sounded triumphant. "They have an unofficial support network. Plus, they know others who would love to either get out of the military or never wasted their time trying to fit in."

It could be hard as hell getting a job in a specialty when the military gave you a dishonorable discharge and you couldn't tell anyone what you had been doing for years. Black mark and no history. Jehan had faced only part of that prospect before he was sent to Cheyenne Mountain after the clusterfuck in Afghanistan. That would have been bad enough. Just before Apophis' Jaffa came through the Stargate he'd been trying to figure out what the hell he could do if he resigned from the Air Force, because he sure as hell wasn't going to crawl back to his father.

"Misfits, exiles, refugees and throwaways are our people," Vala said.

Mer raised his coffee cup in a toast to that, one everyone matched. Vala tossed her coffee back like it was a shot and didn't even wince.

"Anything else we need to know?" Vala poured herself another cup and sipped from it this time. A dawn breeze rattled the fronds of the palm trees together, like paper scuffing, and carried the rising clangor of Cairo waking up. The pyramids gleamed in the morning sun like they were clad in gold for a breathtaking moment before the light changed again and they returned to dusty stone.

"Just keep up the negotiations with the IOA," Radek said. "Keep attention on you. We prioritized everything that might be monitored, and received the last of those shipments last week. But the longer we have, the more we can accomplish."

"It's all on board already?"

"Ano. It's the background checks that take the most time. The security company we hired is run by ex-KGB. We should have gone with Soay Consulting." Radek made a face of distaste. "We thought they might be too curious."

"But it's not a problem?" Teyla asked.

"Not so far, but I can feel eyes on us sometimes in Los Angeles."

The most a warrant could pull out of Quindozum Enterprises's on-world operations would be their computers, but those were all running advanced encryptions developed by Miko using Alteran math. The NSA would take a century to crack the encryption and end up faced with codes based on Satedan. The SGC didn't have access to any written forms of Satedan. Daniel had probably heard it, but never seen it.

"You should be fine. Quindozum Enterprises isn't moving arms, illegal drugs, trafficking humans or state secrets," Jehan said. Technically. They'd pinpointed armories in four failed states and cleaned them out using Asgard beams, rather than mess with arms dealers and false End User Certificates. Jehan had no qualms about removing munitions from countries where religious conflict or corruption meant it would be used against their own citizens. They'd targeted countries where there were so many factions intent on cannibalizing their own government that no one would ever guess an outside force had stolen weaponry and equipment they would have used on each other.

It had proved easy for Quindozum Enterprises to acquire equipment to ultimately fabricate arms and ammunition too. In the long run, they'd be better off and if everything continued to go smoothly, they would also receive some weapons through the agreement with the IOA. Enough
along with what they'd covertly acquired to fill the gap until they began making their own ordnance.

"Miko?" Vala asked.

"I have found some very good teas."

"I do like the teas here," Teyla agreed. She and Miko had shared tea ceremonies using Athosian brews.

"I also secured the remaining critical machinery to manufacture our own computers and other electronics," Miko added with satisfaction. "Some of it will need to be retooled for our needs, but the price was excellent. The major chip manufacturers have left minor factories unable to keep up."

"As far as the government is concerned, Quindozum Enterprises is interested in establishing factories in Africa and South America using the outdated equipment," Radek said. "A step or two up from distributing out-of-date drugs."

"With what we've learned from Atlantis and the Asgard, we can build machines that will leave everything on Earth in their dust," Mer said. He sounded as satisfied as Miko had. He hadn't gotten over his grudge against the reigning stars of the physics community.

Jehan knew there was a plan to beam flaming dog shit into Malcolm Tunney's office and home just before Revenge left orbit. He suspected Mer and Radek were conniving to debunk all of Tunney's work in public forums before they left too. The physics journals kept piling up and the notes were more and more outraged.

Lindsay waited for a lull in the conversation that started up on chip design.

"Aurora initiated contact and a download from the Ancient installation in Antarctica. It's mostly powered down now and didn't register until Aurora was directly above it."

"Since no one mentioned it, I'll assume this wasn't picked up by the SGC," Mer said.

"You know what assuming does," Jehan teased.

"I also know how paranoid they are, and if they realized we have another cloaked ship, they would have tried to take us into custody already."

"They might think it was Tempestas," Vala suggested.

"They're not linked into the right portions of the Ancient command and control systems," Radek said. "They have the control chair and ATA, so they don't think they need hardline connections."

"Idiots," Mer muttered.

"Did you get anything useful?" Jehan asked Lindsay.

"Maintenance logs going back to the last time the Alterans were there, some medical and research reports from their efforts to cure the plague that took them out, and communications logs."

"Crap," Mer decided out loud.

"Ano."

"I think there might be something useful in the comms logs," Lindsay said.
"What?"

"The locations of the other bases the Alterans contacted."

"There are other Alteran bases on Earth?" Mer leaned forward, suddenly interested. "That Jackson and the SGC haven't found?"

"No, other bases elsewhere in the Stella Via," Lindsay said. "One is called Lodonesia."

"Yeah, so?" Mer demanded.

"Lodonesia is an old form of Lyonesse, which is a supposed city under the sea from Arthurian mythology," Lindsay explained. "I googled it. Damn, I'm going to miss Google."

"Arthur like Merlin like Myrrdin aka Moros? The Alteran mad scientist? The one Jackson has a hard-on for?" Jehan blurted.

"One of them. Never mind that, let him find his anti-Ascended weapon," Mer said. "City under the sea. Sound like somewhere familiar?"

"Atlantis," Radek breathed out.

"We know from the records we've started going through that Atlantis wasn't the only city-ship," Mer said.

"You mean there could another like it in the Stella Via?" Vala breathed.

"Who knows?" Mer helped himself to more coffee, but he was already vibrating with excitement. "But even it is just another base, Novak's right, it's worth checking to see if it still exists. – Did you get the contents of the messages or just the logs?"

"We've got the logs and there may be archived messages," Lindsay said. "We'd have to go back into the Antarctica base's systems to get them."

"How long would it take?"

She cocked her head. "Talk to Lydia, she's better at 'talking' to the Alteran systems. I bet she could manage it in under ten minutes."

"Without the SGC realizing?"

"Without them realizing immediately, at least," Miko said.

"Do it right before we leave orbit," Jehan said. "We might have to cancel the Tunney plan though."

Mer waved a hand. "I can hire someone to torment Tunney the hard way after we're gone. The money left in the accounts will be confiscated or useless to us anyway."

Jehan smiled at him. "Never give up on a grudge."

Everyone at the table nodded.

Jehan lifted his coffee cup in a toast. "Revenge."

"Revenge!"
Mitchell

Cam finally figured out why General O'Neill tapped him to hunt down the Trust mole, and it wasn't overly flattering. He only trusted SG-1. Currently the team was made up of Cam, Daniel, Jonas and Teal'c. Daniel had been the target of the Trust's frame, if there could be any doubts about him, while Jonas and Teal'c were aliens – the Trust wouldn't have them if they volunteered. Cam was the one O'Neill would trust least, and he'd come to the SGC from the Snakeskinners.

The tiny, intimidating woman O'Neill had sent him to meet in LA had given Cam plenty of ideas on how to flush out whoever the Trust had working in the SGC.

O'Neill's orders regarding the surveillance photos had been easy enough to follow, too: only say anything if you don't recognize the subjects. Cam guessed whatever Zelenka, Kusanagi, Grodin and Novak were up to, it was okay with Homeworld. The only problem – as if there was ever only one problem – would be if NCIS had uncovered a different operation.

It was curious though; Cam thought the Pegasan delegation had deliberately omitted any Earth natives except McKay.

He knew when to hold his tongue and keep his questions to himself, though. Maybe it had even been a test, to see if he blabbed to Landry or someone. He knew O'Neill had been baiting traps for moles with 'poisoned' information, waiting and watching to where it surfaced and in whose hands.

Ms. Lange had explained the technique in crisp, clear terms while her two helpers had listened with equal interest.

But even with his crash course in spy-hunting, it wouldn't have been enough without Teal'c and Jonas. Daniel provided a lot of background information on the scientists on Cam's list of possible traitors, but otherwise, he was tied up in DC with O'Neill, whispering sweet nothings in the President's ear and holding Jack's hand.

It turned out that Teal'c understood the ins-and-outs of espionage better than Cam did. System Lords spied on each other, suborned each other's Jaffa and slaves, and a good Prime understood how to conduct both espionage and counter-espionage operations in addition to monitoring the constant plotting of the Jaffa under his command to take his place. Cam had never had to worry about any of his fellow officers plotting to disgrace or assassinate him. Then again, he'd never been stationed at the Pentagon…

Jonas really understood it all. While he'd been a scientist, he'd also been part of Langara's intelligence community. Not to mention that Langara's scientific community was a hotbed of backstabbing and intellectual theft.

Cam had blinked at his team mate and asked, "Are you spying on us?" He'd meant it as a joke but Jonas half-shrugged.

"If I ever go back to Langara, I'll be debriefed on everything I learned here," Jonas admitted. He gave Cam an inquiring look. "Don't we write up reports of everything we learn from every gate mission?"

"I guess." Cam thought of writing reports as the fine art of leaving things out most of the time.

Jonas smiled. "I could spend the rest of my life writing books about Earth if the government didn't classify everything."
"If the Stargate is ever declassified, General O'Neill will have to write his memoirs," Cam reflected. Then he realized Jonas meant the Langaran government.

"Indeed, they would be most amusing," Teal'c agreed. His expression gave nothing away, but Cam knew the big guy was laughing inside. Teal'c had the most respect for O'Neill of anyone, but that didn't mean he revered the man. Teal'c appreciated the human fallibility of the Tau'ri, especially O'Neill's lack of pretention. Cam had wheedled those thoughts out of Teal'c after numerous weekend barbecues and boring gate missions.

Despite the ones with blood and shooting being the missions that Cam remembered best, most gate missions were dull affairs.

"Here," Jonas said. He pointed to a name on the long print out of people Cam thought might be the mole. "See the time stamp?"

Cam peered at it. "Okay, he was in the gate room when Daniel beamed to Paris. So were plenty of others." He was grateful that the new shields put in place after P2Y-299 resulted in the gate room being the only place anyone could beam in or out. It narrowed down the suspect list. Unless he wanted to include the Pegasans, who could punch through the shielding.

Unless, unless. Cam had a headache.

What if Daniel had said something to someone about Paris before he left? In that case anyone might have known where Daniel was and would be. Cam's headache ratcheted up a notch.

"Teal'c, would you hand me the file with the base exit logs?" Jonas requested.

"Of course."

Jonas skimmed through the exit logs faster than Cam could focus. "Right. See, here?" He pointed to an entry. "He leaves half an hour after Daniel is beamed out." He ran his finger down the log to another entry. "And he comes back an hour later."

"So? Some people don't like cafeteria food." Cam wished he'd left the Mountain for lunch. The drive and the rigmarole of signing out and back in would have been worth it. The cafeteria meatloaf was sitting in his gut like irradiated lead and he tasted it every time he burped. Half a roll of antacids hadn't put a dent in the accompanying heartburn. "He could have gone out to lunch."

"At four in the morning?" Jonas asked. "Daniel beamed out at O dark thirty here so he could meet his friend in Paris for lunch there."

That painted a different picture.

"The time difference is how Daniel managed several hours with his friend and was able to return to Washington, DC and attend the briefing at the White House," Jonas concluded.

"He could have gone home."

"He lives out past Nevada Avenue according to his file," Jonas said.

It would take longer than an hour to drive from the Mountain into Colorado Springs and the Old North End and back, even if the man only changed his clothes and fed his cat.

"You believe this man left the Mountain, drove until he was able to make a phone call unmonitored, reported where Daniel had gone, and then returned," Teal'c said.
"It all fits," Jonas said.

"Nothing fits as far as I'm concerned," Cam muttered. "Why the hell would Hartkans sell out?"

"Perhaps he is a believer," Teal'c said.

"How do smart people believe stupid things? Explain that one to me sometime, Teal'c," Cam said and then winced. He had not been referring to the Jaffa; he hoped Teal'c didn't think he'd been making a dig.

"Like my people, the Tau'ri are very good at rationalizing what they want to believe," Teal'c replied.

"Okay. We're going to pull this guy in and talk to him," Cam said. He considered who to trust to take Hartkans into custody. Maybe it would be better to use someone who wasn't stationed at the Mountain – or was transferring soon.

"I'm going to get Dave Telford to round up some SFs." If SG-1 marched in, Hartkans might panic and do something crazy. Cam had learned long ago to be leery of what scientists could do under pressure. Judging by Daniel and Jenn and Jonas? They got mean as trapped rats. Cam didn't want to end up bitten or blown up.

Telford was soon transferring to Area 51 to take over security there, so he wouldn't mind alienating a bunch of scientists if it turned out Hartkans had just meant to go home, then remembered something that couldn't be left for later, so had to return to the Mountain.

Telford probably wouldn't mind pissing off anyone at the SGC. Cam wanted to like him, because he respected the hell out of a man who managed to infiltrate the Lucian Alliance for over a year and made it back alive. But Telford was taciturn and wound too tight for Cam to be comfortable around him.

It was probably leftover vigilance from his stint deep cover so far from home. Plus, Louis Young had been in the Academy with him. News of his murder wouldn't have done Telford's nerves any good either.

Cam had no doubt Telford could handle Hartkans anyway. He'd seen him working out and sparring in the gym; Telford had moves.

Miko

Peter and Radek were in the offices on the second floor of the largest of the warehouses. Quindozum Enterprises had acquired an entire industrial park to house shipments of materials and interview potential recruits and emigres. To confuse matters, they had deliveries coming to and transferring between all the buildings in a game of Three Card Monte meant to confuse anyone trying to keep track of how much came in and went out.

Peter was on the phone with a supplier who thought they could extort an extra 'fee' by not delivering on time. Peter was reacquainting them with the failure to deliver penalty clause in the purchase agreement. He was obviously enjoying himself. Scientists normally spent so much time begging for grants and other funds that being the one in charge of the money was a novel change for him.

Radek was skyping with a scientist in Estonia. Like all the ship crew, it wouldn't be honest to say
he was up late or early, since they all still observed ship time and shifts.

Lindsay was supervising the inspection, packing, and beam-ups of the latest shipment of equipment meant for Atlantis. Anything missing would be a real problem after they left Earth for Pegasus. Everything she okayed moved to the second warehouse and was beamed up from there.

Miko had just finished a frustrating phone call herself and decided a prowl around the complex would help settle her temper. For all that she, like everyone on the 'Quindozum' team, knew the ins-and-outs of Earth culture and were more effective because of it, she'd changed too much to put up with some of the crap she hadn't even been aware of before.

She was expected to be quiet and polite and apologetic for being a woman. It seemed that way to her now at least. She was quiet by nature, and believed being polite hurt no one, but she refused to let anyone stomp all over her anymore.

Unfortunately she couldn't threaten to shoot anyone on Earth. It would draw too much attention to their operation, even if they were winding it up. In a few weeks though, she might revisit McKay's plan for Tunney on a couple of sales representatives she'd had to deal with over the last month.

They'd hired reputable security contractors to patrol the warehouse complex. But inside, where beam ins and large-scale beam-outs of materials into Wraith buffers might be witnessed, the guards were all crew and mostly non-Earthers. They were alert, but not trigger happy – Pegasans confined most of their hostility to the Wraith and didn't automatically assume other humans were enemies.

Miko thought cynically that that was what had allowed the Genii to operate for so long. More cynically, she feared that if Atlantis and the Pegan union of worlds Sam and the others were pioneering succeeded, eventually the Pegasans would become as competitive with each other as Earth's people were.

Maybe she was wrong, though. Maybe without the ideas that they were alone in the universe, or that their religion was the only truth, the Pegasans would move beyond the mistakes Earth kept repeating.

She hoped.

She tucked her communicator headpiece behind her ear and checked she had her knife. After a moment's consideration, she added a small Wraith hand stunner along with a powerful flashlight, then tapped Radek's shoulder, smiled into the web camera briefly and murmured in bastard Alteran that she was going to check the perimeter.

Miko didn't know exactly what put her on the alert as she checked in with the security shift (she didn't want to startle them after all), but instinct raised the hair on her forearms as she walked into the second warehouse.

She didn't question that instinct or hesitate. Instead, Miko moved, fast and quiet, away from the doorway that would silhouette her. She was familiar with the layout of the warehouse and everything stored there, which let her move easily in the darkness between the light flares from beam ups.

She considered and then scrambled up a group of unevenly stacked crates and crossed to the top of a sealed shipping container. Life shipboard had taught her to think three-dimensionally. Ground-grubbers never looked up.

The intruders would be focused on the beam-out pad anyway. Damn it. This was why they had an
entire industrial park and god damn security. But she knew, she sensed someone had slipped through.

The actinic flash of the Asgard beam shifting materials up to Aurora flared every few minutes as the loaders moved containers into place. They'd discovered the hard way that the Wraith beam and storage devices were superior for organics and living matter but didn't do as well with multiple tech objects. Consequently, Aurora's holds and Revenge's were being filled with complex equipment, while the Wraith buffers were filled to brim with supplies, seeds, simple solids, and live animals in even larger numbers than they'd originally planned.

Peter had lobbied for and sold Jehan and Mer on taking on a DNA library of endangered and potentially endangered species instead of just agricultural and domestic animals. It could wait in the buffered storage indefinitely. Cheetahs and hummingbirds, rhinos, condors, wolves and clouded leopards, polar bears, and hundreds of others along with the bees, chickens, cattle, pigs, rabbits, goats, sheep, camels, llamas, alpaca, and horses. Miko didn't even know the whole list of potentially useful animal stock they'd taken on, never mind Peter's 'extras'.

They'd recruited heavily in the biology, botany, veterinary, agriculture and ecological sciences – all areas the SGC had always ignored in its search for weapons.

None of that was important right now. Miko had to concentrate on the intruders.

Her size became an advantage for once: she was too light to make the shipping containers react to her weight. The rumble of machinery masked her approach just as it did the intruders' movements. The annoying beep beep beep of forklifts backing up after dropping their loads was punctuated by the flare of another beam-out.

Miko keyed her radio headpiece on and off, on and off, on and off, and on, the simple, silent preset protocol that alerted the comm officer on Aurora to begin monitoring her and alert the other crew members on-planet. Just in case.

Cat-footing over the tops of the shipping containers while staying low, Miko followed the faint sounds of movement. As she approached, she realized she'd been hearing low voices, too low to make out the words, only the rhythms of speech. No wonder she'd realized something was wrong: nothing sounded as suspicious as whispers.

In her ear, Lindsay spoke quietly, "Do you need back-up?" The comms were all encrypted, but she used bastard Alteran the way the crew were and as Miko just had. It was becoming the common ship-speak on Aurora, where they all had to handle Alteran tech constantly. Anyone overhearing it would be lost even without the encryption, even an Alteran, because they ignored most Alteran grammar in favor of trade-speak's simpler and more logical version.

Miko flicked the communicator off then on again. Yes.

"Heavy or light?" Lindsay coughed. "Sorry, heavy, yes or no?"

Off, on, off, on. No.

"We've notified interior security and the load crew," Lindsay went on. "Peter, Radek and I are on our way and Aurora is live monitoring and has a beam lock on you. Say the word and they'll yank you out. Or all of us."

Off, on. Yes. It might be faster and easier to beam out the intruders, but they might already have seen too much.
"How many intruders? Click for each one."

Off, on, off, on, off, on, off, on.

"Four, confirm, one click."

Off, on.

Miko dropped into a crouch and crept to the edge of the container she was on, close enough to peer over and catch sight of four black-clad individuals, while keeping her profile low. Another beam out flashed, stark light catching them in a snapshot of false motionlessness. She narrowed her eyes. They were all tall and had on watch caps, but not face-covering balaclavas and no camo paint. They weren't afraid of being identified if they were caught.

Three men, one woman. One black, three Caucasian. Ruled out the Chinese, Japanese and Koreans. Probably local, at least Western, but could still be from Russia or Africa, but she calculated the odds were low.

They were all armed as well.

The forklifts rumbled and shut down. It wasn't because they had run out of work to do.

She watched the biggest man – those shoulders had muscles that rolled like a python's coils – slide close to the corner of the shipping container and peer around it.

"Anyone notice, the light show stopped?" the tallest man asked. American accent.

"I noticed that it makes things go poof." That from the one who was only average height. Another American."How the hell are they making this stuff just disappear?" The biggest one sounded offended by the insult to his concept of reality. He shifted slightly and Miko could see he was black and handsome. He reminded her of Teal'c. Very nice.

"Maybe it's an illusion? Like this is practice for the world's biggest Vegas debut?" the tallest one suggested.

"Shut up, Deeks."

"Hey!"

"Shut up," the woman agreed, holding up her hand. Unlike the quarrelsome men, she'd been paying attention, and must have caught some hint of Radek, Lindsay and Peter approaching.

"Company?"

"Yeah, exactly how are we handling that?" Tall – Deeks - inquired. Unhappiness colored his voice. "Badges or not, we don't exactly have a warrant. Considering Hetty told us to back off, I don't think she's going to bail us out if we get busted for trespassing."

"Just take cover, it's probably just a security sweep," Big said. "Hetty will understand when we come back with answers."

"Provided we come back," Deeks muttered. "This place is like a roach motel for stuff and people. What comes in doesn't come out. I'm not ready to go toward the light, but I get a feeling that light is ready to come get you."

Armed law enforcement of some variety, Miko realized, but these were not police and they were
not here officially or even with the tacit knowledge of their superior. She made her decision based on that. She clicked the comm off and on, in Morse code, *Go, no guns, I cover, call.*

Miko freed the hand-stunner and waited until Lindsay, Peter, and Radek sounded in her comm. Three clicks. They were observing better voice discipline than the Earth professionals.

Of course, those professionals had never contended with Wraith or fought in the echoing corridors of a space ship or worried their comms might be hacked or tracked. They were practically innocents.

"Excuse me, but I believe you are trespassing," Peter said from a shadow as they formed a semi-circle facing the four intruders.

"NCIS, Federal officers, put your weapons down!" snapped the biggest man.

"What weapons?" Radek asked, holding up his empty hands.

"You are still trespassing, unless you have a warrant, which should be presented before entering or at least upon confrontation, I believe," Peter said.

"You need to tell us exactly what is going on here," Big demanded.

"No we don’t," Lindsay said, and she did have a hand-stunner. "I'm afraid you've made a mistake coming here."

The woman caught a glimpse of the stunner. "Gun!" she yelled.

Miko fired before Lindsay could, but she'd made the same mistake most on Earth did, even though she should have known better: she'd fired at and stunned the big man, the one showing the most overt hostility.

It was in fact the woman who moved fastest, though, and she got off a shot that would have hit Lindsay if Radek hadn't dived for the shooter’s legs. His tackle took her at the knees and Lindsay stunned them both. Miko took out the second man and the third, Deeks, froze with his weapon aimed at the ceiling. It had all happened very fast.

"They aren't dead, are they?" he asked. He was trying to sound sure, but Miko heard the concern in his voice and liked him better for it. "Your cover shot your guy too…"

"Stunned," Lindsay said. She aimed her stunner at him. "You can save yourself some bruises if you lie down before I stun you too."

Deeks safed his pistol and held it by the muzzle as he sank down to the floor. "It's a nice piece. I'd rather not mess up the sights," he said and placed it on the floor. "Besides, dropping guns can make them go off when they hit."

Lindsay stunned him before he was prone, just in case he had a trick up his sleeve.

"Well," said Peter, nonplussed, it seemed, by how quickly Miko and Lindsay had acted. "This is a bit awkward."

Miko scrambled down from the container. Lindsay offered her a covert fist-bump. Peter would never quite be a pirate like them; he wasn't a shoot first sort of person. His first instinct was always to negotiate. Maybe it was a male thing; they liked to posture before they started hitting each other. Miko had better things to do with her time.
"Beam them up to Aurora and stick them in the brig until we're ready to leave, then beam them down," Lindsay said. "Aurora's brig is much nicer than Revenge's. They'll be fine."

Miko suppressed a smirk. "And you would know."

"I've never been locked up on Aurora," Lindsay corrected. "Revenge's brig isn't bad, though."

"But they've not really done anything wrong," Peter said doubtfully. "It seems unkind and unfair."

Miko remembered the Genii, captivity, and true terror. She remembered Radek chained up. She thought of the moments in the engine room when Kel's Satedans tried to take Revenge and she'd first used a knife. How Mer had looked after Atlantis was restored, with the bloody bandage on his arm because Kolya had had him tortured.

Grimly she said, "They'll survive." They wouldn't be mistreated, they wouldn't be in fear of their lives, they wouldn't even be uncomfortable. If they hadn't chosen to flout the laws they were supposed to uphold, they wouldn't be in this position at all.

Miko had no pity for them.

"Make sure they're all disarmed and checked for the ATA," she said. "Send them to Revenge though – if we're returning them, we don't want them to debrief that they were on an Alteran ship."

Besides, if one of them had the ATA and they were on Aurora, things could get sticky. Aurora tended to let natural ATA carriers get away with too many things. If one of them had a strong expression they might turn something on or off that would cause problems, even though the brig wouldn't release them.

"We'd better get Radek back to the office," Lindsay said. "Poor guy is going to have a headache."

"We're lucky you didn't get shot," Peter said.

Miko nodded. They had been. She should have just stunned the intruders immediately. Next time she wouldn't hesitate.

Peter commed Aurora to report, while she and Lindsay pulled Radek's unconscious form off the woman.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Pay attention to the tags, this is the chapter where they apply. Nothing is explicit, but it still may be disturbing to some readers. If you need more information to decide whether to read on, email me and I'll answer any questions. Or you could skip the Jehan sections and figure out what went on from context.

Jehan

"You can't just steal something for the hell of it!" Even as he told her that, Jehan knew Vala could and would - and had. "It's the Louvre."

"That might mean something to you, darling, but not to me," Vala pointed out.

They'd left Egypt behind and returned to Europe. Teyla wanted to visit the countries of each of the IOA representatives. She'd been persuaded to skip China and Russia. Instead, after France they were going to spend some time in Malta. If Aurora hadn't finished its mission by the time they tired of it, there was Africa and South America and Jehan thought she would appreciate Japan.

But for now there was Paris, and more overt security than they'd endured in Britain or Egypt.

"Okay, look at it this way, just like the Louvre means nothing to you, the artwork there only means something to people here. Its value only exists on Earth. Whatever you steal, you won't get any real profit from," he tried instead.

Vala seemed to think that over.

They were strolling down a street in Paris. Vala approved of Paris, even the rude waiters. The French weren't judgmental. Anyone who wasn't French was to be pitied and fleeced. Jehan had always thought Paris was overrated, but the countryside was gorgeous.

Teyla and Ronon stopped, both looking around with unconcealed interest. Paris' urban sprawl, with its old streets and buildings, was more distracting to Teyla than Ronon. Ronon took in everything with a good eye for threats. Neither of them drove yet, but they had adapted to automobiles easily, and had no difficulties judging speeds and remembering to look when crossing streets.

Mer was barely listening to either of them. He had his head ducked and his eyes on the screen of his tablet. He was trying to come up with ways to hasten the final phase of Aurora's mission. Radek, cursing the hangover from the stun, had commed with news they'd basically kidnapped four federal agents who had trespassed into the warehouse and seen too much. Vala wasn't concerned, but Mer and Jehan both worried about who might come looking for them.

"I could ransom it back?" she offered as a possibility.

"For what? Money? We've already got more than we need. Besides, Earth money will be useless anywhere else."

They started walking again in response to nasty looks from other pedestrians. The French security
contingent earned some too.

"Well, isn't there anything there you've always wanted?" Leaving Earth without stealing something went against Vala's nature. She sounded disappointed.

"Not really."

"Mer?"

"Mmm. The Mona Lisa's ugly, Napoleon was overrated, and the Impressionists all look like they were painted by astigmatics."

Jehan burst into laughter. Vala made a face.

Teyla, who had been quiet through the debate, spoke. "I would like to see what art this world venerates most."

"You saw the British Museum," Mer said. "And MoMA in New York."

"They were both very impressive," she agreed. "My people have little that is both old and non-essential. Paintings, sculpture, architecture – this world is so rich, so untouched."

"I think you mean oblivious," Jehan said, but he did get what she meant. Earth had an unbroken history - one far longer than most people could even imagine when you factored in the Alterans and Goa'uld - that built on itself in a way that had been denied to the worlds in Pegasus. Or to worlds in the Milky Way; the Goa'uld had kept their slave populaces static.

Jehan had been desperate and desolate for so long, enduring serving Ba'al because even killing himself wouldn't provide an escape thanks to Ba'al's sarcophagus. When he and Vala had taken Mer on it had all transmuted into betrayal and bitterness. He'd forced himself to forget how much there was to love about his home world. The last weeks here had reminded him.

Not the people, however; most of them were still assholes, but that seemed to hold true across the universe.

He should have been paying more attention to their surroundings. Their enemies wouldn't care about the civilians around them. The first sizzle of a zat made Jehan scramble for his own blaster – the blaster he wasn't carrying – and then for the hand-stunner. Ronon reacted faster and fired back with his stunner, but Vala was already moving, ducking, and firing back.

"Ambush!" Mer shouted and scrabbled for his own stunner. Mer was proficient, but he was no gunslinger, and the stunner had been concealed: it took him too long. Vala lunged back and to the side to interpose her body between the enemy and Mer. The zat hit took her down.

She fell before the French security shadowing them could even shout to take cover. The ambush had been well set up. The French were firing back, or trying, but there was no cover to be had. No parking, no planters, no convenient doorways, just the sidewalk and the damn street. The only cars passing accelerated away. The other people on the street ducked, screamed, or ran – whatever instinct and experience told them was their best chance. Jehan ignored them. Even if he accidentally hit a bystander with the stunner, they would recover. Unfortunately, hand stunners took time to cycle to full power between shots, so he couldn't exactly spray and pray.

Teyla bent and caught Vala’s arm over her shoulder, trying to drag her back toward the security firing cover. Ronon fired and each shot dropped an attacker. Jehan joined him, as did Mer, but they were stuck in the open. They were outnumbered and worse, Jehan heard one of the security team
yell and spun in time to see more attackers taking the security team out from their flank.

"Flankers!"

Teyla was hit and went down. Jehan's breath caught. A second zat hit killed and Teyla had been dragging Vala.

Mer let loose a stream of Goa'uld invective. "Jehan! Run! Ronon, grab him!"

But Jehan dodged Ronon's grab and went down on his knees next to Vala and Teyla. He groped for Vala's neck, fingers tangling in her hair, and tried to feel a pulse. He saw Ronon grab Mer by the waist and throw them both backward through a plate glass window. He hoped they'd make it out through the back way and there would be no one waiting for them there. He thought the odds were decent.

The zat lit up his nervous system like a torch for the infinitesimal instant before he blacked out. He fell across Vala, numb hand still on her neck, still wondering if there was a pulse to feel there.

* *

Jehan woke knowing there was a Goa'uld close by. It rasped against his nerves in a way Mer and Vala didn't; it was strong. He kept still, kept his eyes shut, and forced himself to think through the post-zat headache and the panic that wanted to claw free.

It felt like he was still on Earth, which was either good or very, very bad. Gravity, scents, something ineffable, all spoke to his senses of a planet, of his home planet. Which meant someone might still find him, if Mer and Ronon had escaped the ambush. The galaxy was too big to gamble his friends could find him if he'd been taken through the stargate or onto a ship.

But a Goa'uld with the power to operate on Earth offered a frightening scenario.

Had the SGC or the IOA been taken over? Had the entire negotiation with them been false on both sides? Could Vala and Teyla have missed the signs? Could he and Mer and the others who knew Earth have been blind to a Goa'uld's presence?

God, where were Vala and Teyla? Had they been taken too?

He could guess that mere hours had passed. He recovered from a zat relatively fast. The body didn't so much become immune as get used to compensating in the aftermath. He knew how to stay still until the worst pain abated; that usually happened faster too. Pushing to move too soon only made everything hurt longer.

The ceiling above him was painted with cherubs, clouds and blue skies, and the ornately molded plaster framing the artwork was all gilded. Jehan could make out that much through barely slitted eyes. So, he was probably even still in France or at least Europe.

When he shifted enough to lift his head and look around that guess seemed confirmed. The architecture and furniture all looked Pre-Revolution. He was lying on an ornately canopied bed. A cheery fire crackled in the white marble fireplace.

Ba'al was sitting in one of the antique chairs in front of it.

He sat with his fingers steepled beneath his goateed chin, contemplating Jehan, and must have known when he regained consciousness but waited until Jehan was looking at him to speak. Jehan forced himself into the smooth grace he'd been trained to use, didn't shout, didn't try to run or
attack, because neither would succeed – he knew – and instead sat up.

Ba'al was dressed in a finely tailored dark wool suit. The only gold on him was a heavy ruby signet ring and a kara'kesh on one hand. Jehan suspected the ring was much more than a ring, but it had been designed to look like something a modern-day businessman on Earth might wear. The kara'kesh was flashy and obvious. Ba'al looked out of place in the gilt and ivory decadence of what seemed like a French chateau's bedroom, but only in the way anyone from the present would.

"My rebellious lo'taur," Ba'al greeted Jehan.

Jehan got to his feet, though he still felt unsteady.

Ba'al gestured to a second chair, angled toward him and the fireplace for conversation. "Sit."

Jehan looked around the rest of the room. There were Jaffa, stone-faced but dressed as typical Earth bodyguards – black suits, ties, earwigs – stationed at all the doors. They carried Jaffa weapons, though, and their forehead brands were uncovered. It made them even more incongruous.

No sign of Teyla or Vala. Nor Mer or Ronon.

He took the seat Ba'al had indicated, because it was never worth the effort to defy him over the small things. Jehan knew he would need all his strength later.

"No greeting for your god?" Ba'al inquired with a raised eyebrow, his voice sweet and sardonic at once.

"You aren't my god," Jehan replied. His voice rasped. He blamed it on the zat-hangover. "You're a Goa'uld."

"Is it not the same thing?"

"No."

Ba'al smiled, small and mocking, pleased by Jehan's response.

"You disappointed me, Jehan," he said, "but I understand now. If I had understood you were Tau'ri… " He smiled again, crocodilian, and shrugged. " … but I did not know the Tau'ri then, so who can say I would have treated you differently? Now, however, I have come to appreciate your impertinence and even your disrespect."

Jehan kept his face empty, expression smoothed away. Ba'al loved his own voice, loved to explain and expound, and the longer he talked, the longer Jehan was not being tortured.

"And, though you abandoned my service, I am in a mood to be, shall we say, forgiving?" Ba'al purred. He leaned forward. Jehan froze because he wanted to lean away, to leap away, but recoiling would only anger Ba'al. He could control his muscles and kept his breathing steady and slow, but he knew the hammer of his pulse was a telltale Ba'al could detect.

"Oh, don't be so anxious, Jehan," Ba'al went on. "You've done so well, gathered so much that will be precious to me."

"Like what?"

Ba'al stroked his arm. "The Tau'ri warship, Qetesh's host, that traitor Jolinar's host, new weapons and technology – you know I above all other Goa'uld appreciate those – another galaxy to extend
"my domain." He closed his hand tightly around Jehan's wrist. "And something old and even more precious: Atlantis, a city of the Builders." His fingers tightened. "I am told you possess the blood of the Ancestors."

"I'm not the only one," Jehan said. He wasn't the only one with the ATA. He wasn't the only person who knew where Atlantis was, and certainly not the only one who would fight to keep it out of Ba'al's control. Oh, God, if Ba'al took Atlantis…

Given the choice between Ba'al and the Wraith, Jehan would pick the Wraith. It would be a quick death. The Wraith didn't kill for sadism, at least. They had no more malice than an avalanche, as a species. The Goa'uld were twisted and corrupt and the Tok'ra were little better.

"Oh, I know. I've met Jack O'Neill more than once," Ba'al replied. "I wondered why he reminded me of my lo'taur, until one of my agents mentioned Jehan abd-Ba'al and a stolen Tau'ri warship."

Jehan waited. The logs in the fireplace, ash white over simmering embers, crackled and fell into a new arrangement as the flames ate them away. The light through the tall French windows shifted subtly from midday warmth to something thinner as it approached evening. Mauve shadows grew along the white walls and ceiling of the room.

"I want the other ship," Ba'al stated sharply. His eyes flared white. "The ship your Pegasans are offering the Tau'ri for beads and baubles." The scorn in his voice was merited. Nothing they proposed to receive from Earth would equal the value of an Ancient warship. It was an idiot's trade, on the face of it, if they hadn't wanted to help Earth. If they intended to go through with it. Vala and Teyla hadn't outright said so, but Jehan guessed it was not highly likely.

Vala didn't trust the IOA to keep its word. Mer knew the SGC and he didn't expect them to come through either. Jehan only knew the ways of Earth and its governments and militaries enough to know they'd try some sort of double cross. Mutual profit was antithetical to the way most politicians thought: any deal where they didn't think they'd beaten the other side somehow was unacceptable.

Beads and baubles, that was particularly apt. The IOA still believed they were the ones getting the better of the poor primitives. If they did keep Tempestas, Jehan wondered if they wouldn't rename it New Amsterdam.

"Your Jaffa couldn't crew it," he told Ba'al honestly.

"But I'll have my loyal lo'taur," Ba'al replied. His gaze was sharp. His fingers stroked over the pulse point on the tender inside of Jehan's wrist. "My lo'taur and perhaps some Tau'ri or Hebridians."

Jehan knew the kind of trash Ba'al meant. A dozen steps down from crew for hire, not even real mercenaries; opportunists, not professionals. They existed on Earth the same as through the rest of the galaxies. Men like Caias, mostly, not clever enough to be Kels or ruthless enough to be Kolyas. The Lucian Alliance was awash with them. Always the second in commands, without a speck of honor to besmirch their avarice. He would willingly sit in the command chair and open the ship to vacuum without hesitation if it took Ba'al along with them.

"You can't command loyalty," he said because Ba'al would never buy that Jehan would fold now when he'd succeeded in escaping once.

Ba'al threaded their fingers together. Jehan tightened his grip reflexively. He remembered this. Ba'al wasn't always cruel, wasn't always the torturer, and he enjoyed the pleasures of his human
body the way humans enjoyed them, and with great skill.

"But I can compel it," Ba'al replied.

"Not with that," Jehan told him with a nod to the kara'kesh on his hand.

Ba'al let go of Jehan's hand to withdraw a smartphone from his suit coat. It looked as innocuous as the Goa'uld weapon, but dissonant in counterpoint to the heavy, jeweled kara'kesh. A touch to the screen and it displayed a live feed which he turned for Jehan to see.

He caught his breath despite himself. The small screen showed Teyla hanging by her wrists in an ill-lit, stonewalled room. It could have been any dank Goa'uld torture chamber. It could have been a dungeon beneath this very chateau.

Jehan couldn't see Teyla's face. Her head hung down and her tangled hair fell forward, concealing her features.

Jaffa couldn't have children with humans. When they raped, it was an act of violence and dominance with no veneer of desire or sexuality. They didn't have much in the way of body taboos, either. So, while Teyla had been stripped to the waist, the purpose had been the whipping that left red welts on her torso, not sexual assault.

Jehan swore to himself that he would kill whichever Jaffa had been responsible - if Teyla didn't get to him first.

"She's magnificent, by the way," Ba'al commented. "Fit to be a queen." He tapped the screen and it switched to a recording as Teyla bit off helpless shrieks of agony. Jehan didn't even need to see the implement to know it was a pain stick. He recognized the rhythm of the application, the pain, the breath torn from Teyla's lungs before she could reassert control. Ba'al's favorite torturer had a pattern. Jehan knew it well.

"Don't look so upset," Ba'al said. "I wouldn't want to share the riches you're going to bring me with a queen of my kind or any of my kind."

Jehan didn't relax.

"I can see how fond you are of her. Qetesh's host seems nearly as invested. The things she's threatened to do to me… It was almost like having Qetesh herself back."

Vala was alive too. The part of his heart that would always be hers began to beat again. Jehan could guess Ba'al's strategy now: he would use Teyla and Vala to coerce Jehan.

"Of course, I loathed Qetesh," Ba'al added after some consideration. "But not enough to give even her host over to the Lucian Alliance." He side-eyed Jehan. "You know of the bounty on her, of course."

"Yes."

"Get me that Ancient ship, Jehan, and your Vala and Teyla will go free," Ba'al promised.

Jehan raised his eyebrows. Playing stupid would be a giveaway. He'd never hidden his intelligence from Ba'al – too proud and foolish at first and later, it had been calculation: Ba'al enjoyed owning both the beautiful and the clever. If Jehan didn't want to be cast aside, he had needed to be both.

"You think they'll just let it go?"
Ba'al laughed. "Perhaps not the little queen, but Vala Mal Doran? Her reputation precedes her. There is nothing and no one she would not give up to save herself. And without her, the little queen will have no one to help her," he explained.

"And me?"

"You are too smart to defy me, aren't you?"

Jehan weighed Vala and Teyla's lives and nodded. Mer would forgive him. "You'll let them go?"

"My word upon it," Ba'al promised. He caressed Jehan's temple.

"Forgive my doubt," Jehan replied in Goa'uld. "I have been too long away from you."

"Come," Ba'al said. He stood. "Prove yourself, prove your submission to your god." He gestured to the bed where Jehan had woken.

Jehan followed him to it. He wished Ba'al would send the Jaffa out, but having them watch would be nothing new.

The smartphone trilled, drawing Jehan back into full awareness from the hazy place he'd let his mind go to for the last hours. He ached, skin and muscles protesting the abuse Ba'al had inflicted. The expensive sheets were ruined, sticking to Jehan's welts and scabs in places and simply stained in others.

He turned his head to one side and watched without otherwise moving as Ba'al retrieved the phone and read a text message, then made a call. He couldn't stop the flinch when Ba'al ran an absent hand down his naked back while he spoke.

Ba'al tutted.

"Sensitive," Jehan said as cover. His voice was hoarse.

"Superb," Ba'al commented. "Balim," he purred into the phone. "What news is sufficient to interrupt me?"

The dark eyes on Jehan were sharp as always. Jehan made himself stretch lazily.

"Continue to surveille the Lucians. Ready my pel'tak as well. I will be in Paris by afternoon," Ba'al told his caller. "Kill the mole before Kolcheck can question him. No. Lange would spot any of your clumsy thugs. I will deal with her myself." He ended the call and frowned at the phone before setting it aside.

Jehan stilled. Slow, calm breaths, he reminded himself. Give nothing away. *Aurora's* on-world team had used a man named Kolcheck to do background checks on potential recruits. If Ba'al had a mole inside Kolcheck's security firm, they could have infiltrators. He couldn't do anything yet, but swore Ba'al would regret being so careless in front of him.

"You will tell me everything necessary to take the Ancient ship," Ba'al stated, "but for the moment, it can wait. Your disappearance has stirred the Tau'ri anthill. I have business that can benefit from the chaos."

He rose from the bed and walked across the room without regard to his nudity. Jehan concentrated
on breathing normally and staying loose. He didn't want to give away the rage and hate that seethed inside. He hoped that the way he followed Ba'al with his gaze looked like the adoration of a favored slave and not a targeting laser.

Ba'al waved to one of the Jaffa. "Go, have my car readied. I need to return to Paris. Kree!"

"Yes, my lord." The Jaffa wheeled and left the room. His companion waited stoically.

"Keep my lo'taur in these rooms," Ba'al instructed. "He is free to bathe and prepare himself, provide him with meals, but do not allow him to speak with anyone until I return."

"And the other two, my lord?" the Jaffa asked.

"Keep them in the dungeon. No food, no water until the third day if I haven't returned before then."

The Jaffa inclined his head in mute compliance.

Jehan sat up and gathered the top sheet up from the floor to wrap around himself. He watched as Ba'al stripped the kara'kesh from his hand and casually dropped it onto an eighteenth-century antique card table. The Goa'uld weapon gouged through the lacquered top and into the wood. Jehan winced at the carelessness. He'd never been an antique guy, but he'd grown up in Patrick Sheppard's perfectly decorated mansion and been schooled to never damage the antique furniture. As a soldier, he couldn't continence mistreating a weapon, either.

Ba'al headed for a set of doors that had probably had once opened into a maid's room and now contained a washroom. "Have the cook prepare a small breakfast for me to be ready downstairs after I have washed and dressed."

The Jaffa went to the door and spoke to someone outside it.

Ba'al snapped his fingers. "Jehan, attend me."

Jehan slid off the bed and followed Ba'al into the washroom. Body slaves generally attended to Ba'al in the bath, but as lo'taur he'd done so many times. Performing those tasks in a French chateau added a layer of unreality, but he remembered what to do and adapted in the case of dressing Ba'al in an expensive Savile Row suit.

Ba'al replaced the ruby ring on his finger when he'd finished dressing, but ignored the kara'kesh in favor of a slim, expensive wrist watch. Jehan deliberately paid no attention to it. The Goa'uld weapon was useless to anyone without a symbiote or lingering naquadah in their blood. Ba'al had demonstrated that to him early on; it was a lesson too painful to forget.

"The Tau'ri preference for eschewing adornment baffles me," Ba'al remarked. He examined his hands. His fingernails were glossy and perfectly manicured.

Jehan swallowed bile and said, "A god deserves adornment but does not need it."

Ba'al chuckled and replied, "Such a clever tongue, my lo'taur."

"I speak only the truth." He just didn't consider Ba'al a god.

He could see that pleased Ba'al. Ba'al was smarter than most Goa'uld, but just as arrogant and conceited. The former was what Jehan was counting on.

Ba'al stroked Jehan's cheek. "You missed your god, didn't you?"
"I did not know how to return to you, my lord," Jehan said.

"For an Ancient ship and Atlantis, I can be most forgiving. We will begin when I return."

Ba'al left after that. The remaining Jaffa eyed Jehan suspiciously, but Jehan was naked, while the Jaffa had both a zat and a staff weapon.

Jehan summoned up his memories of serving Ba'al and ignored the Jaffa to head for the bathroom.

"What are you doing?" the Jaffa demanded in Goa'uld.

Jehan replied in the same language. "To clean myself so that I may be pleasing to the god when he returns." A more honest reply would have been, 'To scrub myself raw so I can get the feel of his hands and mouth off me.' Jaffa weren't telepaths, though, so the spoken words were accepted.

After he'd showered and found pants and a shirt, Jehan wandered around the bedroom suite. He didn't try to go to the windows to get out or even figure out where they were. Instead, he straightened the room. He stripped the wrecked sheets then dumped them in the chair beside the table with the kara'kesh while he remade the bed from linens he'd found in a free-standing wardrobe.

Vala had taught him to pickpocket. It was simple to sweep a corner of a dirty sheet over the table and take the kara'kesh with it. The Jaffa was bored and not paying attention.

He slid his hand into the kara'kesh unseen. It settled into place comfortably and warmed, almost tingling, responding to the naquadah Beckett had introduced to Jehan's blood. Sam had been upset over Vala essentially bribing Beckett to come up with the treatment, but she'd never known the helplessness of having a weapon at hand that she could not use.

It wasn't just weapons either. Jehan could use the healing device too and help Mer or Vala the way they'd healed him often enough.

He hadn't anticipated this scenario when he took Beckett's treatment. He’d mainly taken it to please Vala and Mer.

He'd practiced with Vala's kara'kesh on the trip from Atlantis to Earth. He knew how to activate and use it.

It was simple to turn, drop the sheets, and stretch out his hand, palm forward, the red jewel centered at his palm flaring incandescent, knocking the Jaffa guard out with a strong blast of energy. The Jaffa crumpled to the floor with a loud thump.

Jehan snatched up the staff weapon and aimed it at the door, waiting, but the noise failed to draw anyone.

Next, he relieved the Jaffa of his zat and used it on him. He’d had a couple of knives, too.

He called out quietly for help in Goa'uld. No one responded, so he ducked his head out the door. There was only an empty hallway.

Ba'al had said Teyla and Vala were in a dungeon. He figured the most likely place to find a way down to them would be the kitchen. It was also the likeliest place to find anyone else in the chateau. Someone had to be there to cook for Ba'al.

He was right. A cook, two servants and two more Jaffa were in the kitchen. He zatted all of them
and collected their weapons. He helped himself to a jacket hanging near the door. The chateau, even in the kitchen, was cold.

He’d found a cellphone on one of the servants. He loved fingerprint recognition. All he had to do to unlock it was press the unconscious man’s thumb to the screen.

Ba'al or his Jaffa had stripped Jehan of his communicator and it was nowhere in evidence. They’d taken the phone the SGC had provided as well, and he couldn't remember the number for Mer’s to call him direct.

He called the front desk of the hotel where they’d been staying instead and left a message for Mer with the number of the cell he’d snagged. Mer would be able to track it. In case he got caught, though, he silenced the ringer and hid the phone in a cabinet filled with copper pots.

Thinking of Mer warmed him. It also reminded him he hadn’t eaten since the day before. He snagged a croissant and ate it mindlessly while he searched for the way to the dungeons. When he found the concealed door with stone steps leading down beyond it, he stopped to wrap two more croissants in a napkin and shove it in the pocket of the coat.

Barefoot and silent, staff aimed ahead of him, Jehan started down.

* * *

Teyla nearly took his head off with a length of chain still attached to one of her wrists when he came through the door into the main portion of the dungeon. Jehan had come in low, because Jaffa shot high. The chain whizzed over his head and smacked the door jamb with brutal force. One link sank so deep in the wood Teyla had to jerk on it twice before it came loose.

Ba'al's favorite torturer was laid out on the stone floor. Jehan almost smiled. He remembered this one. Teyla could take him in a fight on her worst day.

"You good to get out of here?" he asked. He wasn't stupid enough to ask if she was okay. She wasn't, any more than he was. No one was okay after torture.

"Yes," Teyla replied shortly. She coiled the chain around her forearm and accepted one of the zats, along with a knife. "Vala is locked in a store room."

Jehan nodded at her grim expression.

Vala answered his knock and call at the store room. She'd fashioned a nasty version of the old bucket of water over the door using cleaning supplies. Any Jaffa through that door would have received a face full of drain cleaner. She'd snapped a wooden mop handle in two so she could use them as rudimentary bantos sticks or stab with them.

She had sharpened the ends too. Jehan grinned at that. "Looks like you're ready for vampires."

Vala gave him a sour look and traded a stick for a zat. Teyla looked intrigued. "Like in your movies? These 'vampires' are real?"

Jehan supposed he shouldn't be surprised that someone had introduced Teyla to the concept since so many of the expedition insisted on calling the Wraith 'space vampires'.

"Where's Ba'al?" Vala demanded.

"Paris."
She glanced at the *kara'kesh* on Jehan's hand.

"Yes, it works. He didn't bother with it when he left," Jehan said.

She held out her hand and wiggled her fingers come-hither. Jehan closed his hand in a fist over the weapon's jewel. Vala rolled her eyes. "Hand it over, darling. I can do more with it and it would be better if we kept your new trick a secret."

Reluctantly, he handed over the *kara'kesh*. He kept the staff weapon.

"May we leave now?" Teyla asked, dry as dust and so done with them both.

They headed upstairs.

The kitchen was so warm after chill of stone and being underground. The Jaffa and staff were still out.

Vala zatted each of the Jaffa twice more. Jehan didn't protest. He understood her decision. Dead they were no longer an enemy at their back. Gone, they were a mystery that couldn't be used against them. He knew the man he'd been before Apophis' Jaffa dragged him from Cheyenne Mountain would have protested. But that man had been shattered by what Jehan had done with Ba'al.

Had been shattered, died, and been resurrected as Jehan. John Sheppard had been a soldier; soldiers didn't do the things Jehan had to do to survive.

Jehan *had* survived. He didn't regret it. So it was time to give up his bitterness toward Earth and the Tau'ri. Holding on to who he had been did him no favors.

He went through the staff’s pockets until he found a set of car keys.

Vala and Teyla followed him silently, deferring to his familiarity with the layout of Earth dwellings. They stayed low and mostly communicated with hand signs even after they were outside the chateau's walls. Jehan worried there would be someone watching from a window or monitoring a security system. He kept looking but found no cameras.

Either the chateau had a very discreet system in place or it had never been wired for surveillance.

There were multiple out-buildings, but Jehan spotted an empty area that had been given over to parking. The cars remaining were battered and older, some with mud up to the wheel wells — they probably belonged to staff.

A black Renault that had to be twenty years old opened for the keys he'd taken from the man in the kitchen.

Jehan ground the gears and winced, but Vala and Teyla didn't comment. Vala took the front passenger seat and Teyla sank down in the back. A heavy jacket had been left behind and she pulled it on with a sigh of relief.

"Once we get going and the engine warms up, I can turn on the heat," Jehan told her. He mentally crossed his fingers the heat on the Renault worked as he put it in third and set it lurched up the chateau's drive.

He took a guess and turned right when the drive reached a paved road. He wanted to get back to Paris and find Mer, to get back in touch with *Revenge*, but he didn't want to meet Ba'al returning
from there. He had no real clue to which way would take them toward the city, though, so he gambled.

It began raining. Jehan switched on the wipers and lights. Beside him, Vala stared out at the French countryside. Even wet and muddy, it was pretty country. The heater pumped out a couple of diesel-scented puffs before starting to warm the interior. Teyla sighed behind him. Vala flexed the hand with the kara'kesh. Her nails were all broken off, two torn to the quick and bloody. Jehan tried to relax his grip on the steering wheel. It had been a long time since he’d driven an automobile, but the old reflexes came back thanks to years of muscle memory.

"I am going to find O'Neill," Vala said abruptly, "pin him down with a knife through each of his balls, slice the tendons in his hands, then I'm going to open him up and tie knots in his guts. I'll heal him just enough to keep him from dying too fast."

"You believe he knew Ba'al was on Earth?" Teyla asked.

"He used us as a stalking horse," Jehan agreed. They'd gone along with it, but playing bait for O'Neill's political enemies and being staked out for a Goa'uld were entirely different games.

He noticed that Teyla hadn't objected to Vala's plan. Neither had he.

* * *

He wouldn't have spotted the gateship without the rain. It was cloaked and had to have come from Aurora. He couldn't see it, but could see where the rain pinged off it and ran down the sides.

It paced just in front of the Renault. Since it hadn't decloaked, it was either trying to remain unnoticed by the authorities or they didn't know who was in charge in Renault.

Either Mer had received the message Jehan had left with the hotel or he'd found some other way to locate them. Scanned the area for human life signs or body heat and naquadah signatures, maybe. Which would just as easily have shown up Jaffa and Goa'uld, which explained their caution.

"Look who's here," he remarked.

Vala narrowed her eyes before laughing in delight. Teyla sat up and leaned forward to peer through the windshield. It only took her a second to spot the rain displacement too.

Jehan began blinking the headlights on and off, quick and slow for dot and dash, in Morse. He and Mer had taught it to everyone on Revenge and all the expedition had already known it. The Pegasans had picked it up up fast and unlike sign language, it had not propagated through the gate translation system, so it remained a secure communications code. Driving and coding wasn't that hard, but he stuck to their names.

After several repetitions, he pulled the old car onto a spot just wide enough for the gateship too. The gateship hovered.

Jehan got out first. Teyla followed, still wrapped in the car owner's coat, and Vala finally exited too, complaining about her hair and the mud that immediately squished onto her boots. It made Jehan glance down and curse: Teyla didn't have any shoes either.

The gateship dropped to within a few inches of the ground and turned. The cloak stayed on, but when the back hatch dropped, they could see inside.

Ronon was there along with a squad of fighters. Haemi was all geared up and Mer was barreling
out ahead of her –

He nearly slammed into Jehan, snagged Vala off balance and still freed an arm to reel Teyla in. "God, you – you – that chateau is shielded somehow, we couldn't find you – "

Haemi and Ronon scanned the road and the rain wet fields for threats. "Come on," Haemi said. She didn't pay special attention to Teyla, but positioned herself close.

"We should get out of the open and back to the ship," Ronon added.

They left the car running, lights on, wipers swishing, doors hanging open. Let the French police investigate and trace it back to the chateau.

Once they were in the gateship, Ronon hugged them too. Haemi stroked her hand down Jehan's shoulder and over Vala's tangled hair before pulling Teyla close.

"Who was it?" Mer demanded as soon as Jehan drew back enough to breathe. "Who had you?"

"And are they dead?" Haemi added.

"Are you okay? Melena's here, up front with Miko. *Aurora* and *Tempestas* are in position to beam us straight up – the SGC has eyes on *Revenge*. And they know we are pissed as hell," Mer blurted without stopping to breathe himself.

"Ba'al," Vala said flatly.

Mer froze before turning a horrified look to Jehan. He didn't let go of him, though. His fingers tightened on Jehan's arms instead. "That – " Jehan leaned into him.

"Is he dead?" Mer asked softly.

Jehan shook his head.

"You got away." Like that was all that mattered and Jehan knew that it was. Mer wouldn't judge. Jehan let himself melt closer to him for a second.

"Were we the only ones taken?" Teyla asked.

Ronon nodded. "I got Mer out of there. I knew he had the best chance of finding you. We couldn't trust the Tau'ri."

"Good job, darling," Vala said. She smiled brightly. It didn't fool Jehan, he could see how much effort it cost, but Vala needed her masks. He didn't begrudge her the act. "We'll use this to insist on more concessions. Possibly something expensive from the Louvre."

"Screw 'em, let's loot the entire place," Mer declared.

Jehan choked and laughed.

"Let's get the hell out of here," he said once he had control again. "We'll tell everything once we're back home."

They'd end up on *Aurora* first, but *Revenge* was waiting for them.
Callan

They were in a brig when they woke up. Callen didn't know where or what – it looked like a sub or a ship – but he recognized a cell when he was locked in one. Cameras watched them, there were no windows, the only door was an air-tight hatch and they had the oh-so-nifty open plan sanitary design. No shower, no paper, but he'd been in enough shitty prisons to appreciate the auto flush, wash, and air dryer. There was even a sink and hand air dryer – no controls, just stick your hand under, get wet, then a poof of foamy soap would come out followed by rinse water and the dryer.

The lights dimmed down to minimum for a block of time on a regular schedule that didn't match Callen's internal clock but wasn't geared to be disorienting. Instructions were printed in places on the walls – in English. They glowed faintly when the lights went down. Since some of them were for emergency protocols that included loss of power Callen was a little impressed.

He was mostly freaked out though, because he and the others had woken up in the cell, with zero memory between being caught and ending up wherever they were. They'd been stripped and dressed in rough-woven drawstring pants and loose cotton shirts, with no shoes.

There were no bunks or blankets, just a thick soft mat covering the floor. The temperature was within a degree of body temperature so blankets weren't necessary. One less thing for an enterprising prisoner to repurpose toward an escape.

Sitting on the mat it was hard to tell, but touching the walls there was a deep vibration that couldn't be heard, just felt. The only sound in the cell that they didn't make was the steady blowing of circulating air.

Deeks was sitting Indian-style, either meditating or just ignoring them. Sam and Kensi kept prowling, looking for any opening, anything they could use.

"Hetty will get us out of here," Kensi said.

"Hetty specifically told us to back off," Deeks pointed out without opening his eyes. "She might leave us here to teach us a lesson."

For a while, at least.

Callen knocked his knuckles against the hatch and listened. Solid. Thick. They weren't muscling that thing open.

"What do you think, Sam?" he asked. "Ship or sub?" He leaned toward submarine himself. Ships were noisy inside.

True, subs could be too, if they were running silent. One dropped wrench and the clang could echo through the entire thing. Or so it seemed.

Callen was not fond of subs or ships.

"Neither," Sam said. "We're not on or in water."

"You sure?"
"Yes."

Sam was the former SEAL. He'd know.

"Then why the airlock?" Kensi asked.

"Could be a biohazard measure," Callen speculated. If so, it was for something a lot more serious than what you'd throw up a tent and some plastic and bleach to deal with.

"Labs don't usually have cells," Deeks pointed out. His eyes were open now. His whole face, even his posture, gave off how unhappy he was.

Deeks was unhappy with all of them. He hadn't spoken to Kensi once. Callen checked her. She was glaring at the camera monitoring them. She hadn't offered Deeks any comfort either. Hadn't even asked him if he was okay. Even Sam had asked if everyone was okay.

Yeah, everyone was not okay. Deeks hadn't said 'I told you so', but he didn't have to.

Kensi didn't do guilt well. Neither did Sam or Callen for that matter. They were all allergic to saying they were wrong or sorry, too. The thing was Deeks had stopped expecting apologies from them. When you stopped believing someone would admit being wrong, you stopped believing they would do right. If you didn't believe that, how could you trust someone? Callen had to wonder exactly how far Deeks still trusted the rest of the team.

Not that Deeks was blameless. He kept trying to 'protect' Kensi to the point she lashed out at him. Kensi wasn't the kind of woman who would let a man smother her. Resentment and frustration weren't good for a relationship or a team either.

"Nice, legal, official labs that operate according to the law don't have cells," Sam said.

"Point," Deeks admitted. Sam smirked and traced it in the air. Kensi rolled her eyes at them.

The hatch opening snapped their attention to it. "Everybody stay steady," Callen told them. The time might come for a bull rush on their captors, but not while they knew so little.

The hatch shifted, dropped an inch, and rolled back into the wall with a pneumatic hiss. Callen swallowed so his ears popped as the pressure equalized.

An armed group waited on the far side of the hatch. Callen didn't recognize any of them. They had guns, but he didn't recognize what kind. The knives were more obvious than he'd ever seen, even among bangers and guerrillas, worn at their sides and tucked in unconcealed boot sheaths.

Callen couldn't put his finger on it, but they all looked slightly off to him. He couldn't guess where any of them came from.

The tallest man, the one in front, had a dreadlocks and a neatly trimmed beard, tattoos visible on his neck and on his bare arms. He wore leather pants, a rough-woven shirt not much different than what Callen found himself wearing. A miniaturized radio headset curled around his ear. His eyes were surprisingly light and very sharp.

"You should be hungry by now," he said.

Deeks' stomach gave an affirmative gurgle. One of the guards behind the spokesman grinned briefly.
"You can come eat in the mess with the crew, spend the rest of your time in the rec room."

"Or?" Callen asked.

"Spend your days and nights here, cold shower once a week and the oldest rations we have on board," was the answer along with a white-toothed grin, "until we're ready to give you back."

"They're Satedan rations from ten cycles ago," the one that had smiled added. "They taste like mud and sawdust with an occasional piece of gravel."

Callen was focused on the 'give you back part'. They hadn't been beaten down, they were going to be fed and provided hygiene. Their captors didn't demonstrate any anger or hostility toward them. They might be luckier than he could have hoped. It sounded like they were either hostages or just being held until they couldn't interfere with whatever Quindozum had planned.

Maybe, if they made nice, they could find out what that was, how much of a threat it posed, and stop them. That was his plan for the moment.

"Something to eat that isn't rations sounds good to me," he replied with a smile.

Spokesman guy said something to his men in a language Callen had never heard, something that piped up and down with inflections – maybe Asian? – but had clicks and whistles that were almost African.

Callen spoke Russian, Spanish, Arabic and a smattering of Urdu and Pashto. He'd heard dozens of other languages. He didn't recognize anything, not even a rhythm, in what he'd just heard.

Sam shook his head when Callen cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Come on then."

Callen followed the gesture. He idly wondered if Sam could take this guy. Just because he knew it would be a hell of a fight, not because he thought it would happen. The best way to fight this man would be to get the drop on him from out of arm's reach and knock his ass out.

He noticed the guards accorded Kensi the same amount of room and respect they did Sam. Apparently the helpless girl card wouldn't play with them. That was annoying even while he respected them for it.

The corridors they were walked through were wider than most ships', broken up by hatches. The deck was painted in wide bands of different colors, matched along eye level as well. Navigation aids. It would have looked military, looked military in its bones, if it wasn't for the decorative paintings, the strange pieces of art work mounted here and there, and the scents of spices, perfumes and incense mixed with recycled air.

He was still trying to figure it out when they entered the mess and the wide vista of space and cloud-streaked blue Earth beneath them paralyzed Callen in his tracks.

"G – " Sam started to complain.

"What?" Kensi asked, because she couldn't see.

Marty could, being tall as Sam, and summed up the situation aptly, "Holy shit."

Callen
"So why does the ship have English signs when most of the crew don't speak or read it?" Kensi asked over a meal of curiously mixed items. Some of it was recognizable; some of it was more alien than the people who didn't come from Earth at all. The cook used it all together in ways that ended up tasting good. It was better than most food Callen had eaten on US warships.

Their guard slash guide, who went by the name Ronon Dex and came from somewhere called Sateda, chuckled, a dark, deep, wicked sound. He ate steadily. His wife, a curly-haired woman, had arrived after them. She sat beside Dex and they occasionally exchanged bits and pieces of food. She dumped her entire serving of one round, thumb-sized, clay brown vegetable on his tray.

"Gefifta," she said when she caught Callen watching, and made a face.

"Should I avoid it?" he asked Dex.

Dex stabbed one on a knife, chewed it loudly, and answered after swallowing. "Depends on how hungry you are." He ate another one. "They get nice and sweet if you roast them long enough."

Callen eyed them.

"Dushka likes to boil them."

Deeks tried one on his plate. He swallowed but made a face. "Yeah, boiling does not make them sweet," he informed everyone else.

Dex shrugged. "Still fills your belly."

Callen's gaze strayed back to the big window ports. The view had made him dizzy at first, but he'd adapted.

"Why aren't we floating?" Deeks asked abruptly. He was looking at Earth too. His face had gone all open and wondering. Callen wondered if his own face looked like that. Probably. Kensi had the best poker face of them all right now; even Sam looked impressed, if you knew him well enough. "I mean we – the ship – isn't spinning, so it's not generating gravity through centrifugal force, right?"

"Artificial gravity."

Callen looked up as four more people joined their table carrying trays of food. In the case of the guy who had answered Deeks' question, two trays, piled high. Broad shoulders, thinning brown hair, a thin and drooping mouth were all second to bright blue eyes. He was dressed in normal Earth clothes – better than normal; tailored, expensive clothes.

He set his trays down and dropped into a seat. The long, lean, dark-haired man just behind him slid into a seat beside him. That one looked like a knife in the dark. Black jeans, black t-shirt, black leather jacket and boots, all of it could pass on the street. The big strange gun strapped to his thigh and all the knives couldn't, though.

It made Callen look back and this time, because he was looking, he saw the fine suit also hid knives and a gun, plus other items he couldn't guess at.

That second glance also showed both men and the delicate-looking woman with the lovely brown eyes all looked drawn too taut. Bruises shadowed their eyes.

The woman in the black dominatrix gear didn't look as worn, but like she'd been honed too sharp long ago. Her mouth might be smiling at them but those gray eyes were merciless.
"Who are you?" Sam asked the one in the suit.

"Meredith McKay, genius physicist, bridge officer, First Engineer of Atlantis, smartest man in two galaxies," McKay answered. "Canadian, obviously." He didn't even sound particularly arrogant about it, more matter-of-fact, since his interest seemed to be on his food.

"Sadly true," his buddy in black commented. His tray wasn't loaded as heavily, and he shoved what was there around without lifting any to his mouth.

"What, not going to tell them my ego is the biggest?" McKay asked him. His eyes narrowed, then he knocked his fork against other man's tray with a clink, the issue dismissed. "Eat some of that."

"You're a little puffed up, but you don't compare to the biggest egos." the dominatrix said. Callen couldn't pin her accent, it reminded him of Australian, but wasn't, so he pegged her as another alien. Person not from Earth. They all looked human.

"Thank you, Vala," McKay said.

She smiled at him. "Those belong to the Goa'uld."

McKay's expression fell, then he gave her a betrayed glare.

"The Alterans," added the other woman in a sweet as honey voice.

"Et tu, Teyla?"

Her smile was as sweet as her voice. It accentuated the fading, green-hued bruise along her jaw.

McKay's friend eschewed eating to glance over the four of them and say, "No one introduced you to any of us, did they?"

"And I'm thinking the names of the people we were looking at in L.A. were false," Callen replied. They knew they were thanks to Arkady's digging, but they hadn't put it together. The only illegal aliens NCIS was interested in were terrorists. Playing that up might get them so more information. He'd never enjoyed playing dumb, but he could when necessary. He wanted to know what these people were doing; what they were on Earth for, why they were buying what they were buying.

McKay snorted.

His friend went on. "You already met McKay and Ronon. Head of the table, Vala Mal Doran, captain of Revenge and Fleet Commander."

"You forgot Pirate Queen of Atlantis," McKay mumbled through a full mouth, "Scourge of the Spaceways."

"Oh, I like that one," Vala said.

Everyone at the table, bar Callen's people, snickered.

Pointing confirmed the other names Callen had picked up: small woman with bruise – Teyla Emmagan; Athosian, Pegasus Ambassador to the Tau'ri. Ronon Dex and his wife, Melena; Satedans, ship crew, commando leader and ship's chief medic respectively.

"Where are you from?" Callen asked Captain Mal Doran.

"That planet with the goats."
"Seriously?"

She made a moue of distaste. "It barely had a gate address. Believe me, everyone who ever had the misfortune to stop there called it 'that planet with the goats'. No one there had enough imagination to call it anything."

"Well, to be fair, the Tau'ri call their planet a word that's synonymous with dirt," McKay said. He might identify as Canadian born, but he didn't consider himself one of them. Otherwise, he'd have said 'our' not 'their'.

Callen rocked back in his seat. His brain was threatening to go zzzzzzt! These people were talking about being from different planets the way he'd talk about… countries. He looked at the last guy.

"And I'm Revenge's pilot, Jehan abd-Ba'al." He stuttered over the last part and shook his head. "No. Jehan Sheppard."

McKay froze with his fork halfway to his mouth. Mal Doran drew in silent breath and focused all her attention on… Sheppard? The others were silent too, paying attention, aware of something here that Callen wasn't. Though even he could see that something momentous had just happened.

"About fucking time," McKay declared into the tense silence. He dropped his fork and took Sheppard's hand in his, folding their fingers tight together.

"I suppose so," Sheppard said. He picked up his fork with his free hand and began eating.

"You're from – " Deeks stopped and shook himself like a wet dog, shedding automatic disbelief, " – here. Earth."

"And I thought you were a fraction smarter than the rest of them," McKay replied. "Here, Revenge. Earth, down there. Gravity well."

"Mer and I and a couple of the people you already, uh, met are from Earth originally," Sheppard told them. He met Deeks' gaze, hazel eyes steady, then turned to McKay. "Don't be an ass. It's hard to rearrange everything you thought you knew. And we did sort of kidnap them."

"Yeah, that – there isn't going to be any little green men or probing happening, right?" Deeks joked, though he looked a little nervous.

Kensi slapped his arm.

"I heard the Asgard High Council made Loki stop that shit after he cloned Jackass," McKay said. "Anyway, they've fucked off back to their own galaxy."

Deeks gulped.

McKay snorted. "Don't worry about them. You're getting the nice introduction to reality. People who speak your language, are the same species, and aren't interested in infesting you or torturing you for shits and giggles."

"Is that what - ?" Kensi stopped herself.

Sheppard grimaced, McKay looked constipated and Mal Doran looked at her nails. Ronon finally spoke for the others. "We're from Pegasus, so – "

"They've got their own problems," McKay interrupted. "Shit. Fine. You invited yourself into this,
snooping where you shouldn't have been. It's all classified, blah blah, treason, whatever. Not my circus, not my monkey." He flapped his free hand. The other was still entwined with Sheppard's. "Like I give a shit about keeping the IOA's secrets."

He proceeded to tell them about aliens and the pyramids and some group called the SGC that travelled around the galaxy pissing off the local power mongers. Apparently Earth had been at war for years with parasites that took over your brain. It made Callen's brain hurt. It also made him so angry his hands curled into fists. Also, he suspected Hetty knew all about it.

"And you're fighting these Goa'uld?" Sam asked slowly when McKay's speech had wound down.

"Not really. The System Lords are pretty much history at this point, except for Ba'al. The Ori are the big threat now, I guess, which is why we're here."

"To help fight," Kensi said.

Ronon snorted while McKay looked pained. "Do we look crazy?"

"Don't answer that," Sheppard told them.

"We here to get everything we can before the Ori smash you to bits," Mal Doran said frankly. She shrugged, then buffed her nails on her jacket lapel. "We're pirates. We wish you all the best, sure, but fighting Tau'ri wars when you won't even tell your people the truth? No. The Ori are not my problem."

"You stole this ship from the SGC, didn't you?" Sam accused abruptly.

Mal Doran smiled at his glower. "All by my widdle self –"

Sheppard coughed.

"Fine, we did. It wasn't terribly hard."

Sam shoved himself back from the table. "So you're just thieves and thugs." His lip curled into a sneer as he stared down at the guns suddenly aiming at him from Sheppard and Ronon.

Callen thought they might be stun guns, but he wasn't sure.

Kensi stood up in solidarity with Sam. Callen wished he'd spent a little more time eating. His tray was still full, unlike his stomach, and he had a feeling they wouldn't be getting the good stuff back in the brig.

Mal Doran wasn't intimidated, Callen had to give her that. And McKay rolled his eyes.

"I don't care for anything but what I want," Mal Doran said. "What I want is my crew safe, my friends happy, my galaxy free of the Goa'uld, Atlantis and Pegasus free of the Wraith, a hold full of naquadah, and – " She studied her nails again and tutted, "Nail polish that doesn't chip." Some of her inner fierceness leaked through. "I'll burn down worlds if I have to, including yours." She glanced at the blank-faced Deeks and then Callen, both still seated. "You can stay and finish your meals if you keep your mouths shut."

"Kind of hard to eat if we keep –"

Teyla laughed.

"Shut up, Deeks," Callen said.
Callen knew Sam had manufactured the scene to go off somewhere he could look for a way to escape, while Callen and Deeks kept Mal Doran and the others distracted. He dawdled over his meal to draw it out, half waiting for an alarm to go off once Sam and Kensi got loose.

It never came. Instead, he and Deeks were escorted back to the same brig cell. Sam and Kensi were both inside.

Sam had a busted lip and Kensi was sulking.

Callen wanted to say something, but sometimes discretion was the better part of not pissing off your partner. Sam had underestimated Ronon, obviously. Sam and Kensi both. Yikes.

"Are you okay?" Deeks asked Kensi.

"I'm fine, but we have to get out of here," she snapped.

"Yeah, I get that, but acting like a brat because you and Sam got your asses handed to you isn't going to accomplish much," Deeks replied. He sounded tired and hurt, a reaction that had become all too common. Deeks' good humor and amiability seemed to finally be running thin. He'd always shrugged off Sam, but Kensi was his partner, and a partner who didn't respect you didn't listen to you and that could get someone killed. And Sam still harbored a seed of resentment for Deeks coming in after Dom, no matter how hard he tried to be fair.

Deeks being in love with Kensi didn't help the situation either, because Callen couldn't read what Kensi felt. Did she love him? Yes, but maybe not as much or not in the way that would work for them. Maybe because she didn't know herself. Callen had been in love a few times, and it hadn't worked out, which was on him, but he knew that love didn't last without trust.

"If you'd hung around instead of insulting Vala and Sheppard and McKay," Deeks went on, "you'd know that they're part of a diplomatic delegation to Earth. Who have weapons and tech Earth needs."

"We could take the ship," Sam said. He crossed his arms, so his biceps swelled, and tried to loom. Deeks just gave him a quirky look, unimpressed, because he knew Sam.

"Yeah?" Deeks replied. "You know how to fly it? You know how to disarm the failsafes?"

Sam took everything seriously and Deeks refused to take anything too seriously, at least on the surface, and never the twain shall fit together. Sam knew Deeks was good at his job, a good person, and a good team mate, Sam cared about Deeks, would have his back, but even so they just weren't meant to be best friends.

"We could force Sheppard."

"I don't think so," Callen admitted. Even if they were prepared to go far enough to break the man, which Callen wasn't, and he didn't care to think Sam would, they wouldn't have time. They wouldn't be who they were if they ever went that far over the line. He wouldn't let that happen to anyone on his team.

"Besides, they're not really doing any harm," Deeks said. "They're buying stuff and taking it off to another galaxy. I mean, do you really think they're going to turn fertile chicken eggs and socks against the US, Sam?"

"You have to admit," Kensi agreed, "that's not exactly threatening."
"Hmph."

"Cheer up, Sam, we're on a space ship," Callen told him. "We get to see Earth from orbit. How many people get to do that?"

"All right, all right." Sam gave in. rubbing his jaw. "I wonder if I could get Dex to teach me that move he used on me?"

**Hetty**

There were eyes on Hetty, of course. OSP was always balanced on the edge of being too independent, surviving only thanks to its successes and her own considerable clout. She might not hold a position of immense official power, but she knew where all the bodies had been buried for the last fifty years. She knew which ops had been botched, the allies that had been double-crossed, what bribes that had been offered and which ones had been accepted. Even when she didn't know, people with too much to lose treated her like she might, just in case.

*The guilty flee when no man pursueth*, she'd taught all her ducklings including Callen's team since. It was a lesson every undercover operative needed to remember.

It wasn't the pains of the body that would end her career, even though every morning reminded her of every torture she'd ever endured. It would be sloppiness. Bad luck. Not taking proper care; taking one too many risks. She was tired. Tired in body, tired in soul, tired of suffering fools, and tired of the Great Game. It was what ended all old spies: exhaustion.

She adored the OSP team she'd put together, loved them the way she hadn't allowed herself after Russia and Poland, after her ducklings, but she could feel the end creeping up on her. Time was an enemy no one could overcome.

Every bureaucratic tangle she dealt with exhausted her a little more, cost her secret capitol, wore away at the belief that kept her committed.

She found herself thinking that retirement would be preferable to another week in DC with the endless debriefings in the aftermath of her missteps in Vietnam. If Shay Mosely was a lesser woman, her team would have never found her in time. Now Hetty needed to safeguard Mosely's career from any backlash. But dear God, how she wished she was home again.

And now Callen's team had gone missing. Owen and Mosely had frozen her out. Mr. Beale and Miss Jones had gone along.

The reins were slipping from her fingers.

She closed her eyes for a full minute, counting the seconds, breathing in and out to the calming rhythm of the meditation she'd learned from the Buddhists monks in Vietnam, letting her heart rate settle and her thoughts clear. Vietnam. Since her return, it had been clear to her that her time had passed. Perhaps she had known as much going in. Her last hurrah.

Well, wasn't that self-pitying.

Hetty could concentrate on winding her own affairs up, so much as she wished or could, and let Miss Jones grow into the role Hetty foresaw for her. Mosely had the chops and the metaphorical strength to keep a leash of Callen and Sam. Miss Blye would be fine.

She wished she could be as sure for Mr. Deeks. Without a rabbi within NCIS, his position was precarious. Mosely was less than enamored of some of Hetty's more 'interesting' recruits, like him.
Grimly, she considered whether she still had enough time and clout to find him a better placement, and whether, given his attachment to Miss Blye, he would accept an offer.

Well, it was moot if she didn't recover her wayward team.

She got to her feet, pain shooting through her joints as she straightened, and told Mosely’s bright young assistant that she was returning to her hotel for the day. She'd found nothing new or useful through NCIS' headquarters. It had been painfully quiet all day; Leon had gone out, and Gibbs’ MCRT had all been out. She’d been too preoccupied to ask about them.

"Do you need a driver?"

Hetty glared. Lovely young woman she might be, but really, she wasn't crippled yet. She didn't need to a nursemaid. "Hardly, my dear."

The girl was very sharp. "You don't want a driver." She meant, You're not going back to your hotel. You don't want anyone knowing where you are going.

"No, I do not." She did want to go back to her hotel, to rest in a hot bath with aromatic oils, perhaps even schedule a massage in the spa, then a quiet dinner from room service. She might even allow herself to escape into a good book for an hour before sleep.

That was what she'd like, but not what she expected to get. Not until she'd found herself some burner phones and made at least one call.

She most definitely did not need anyone keeping tabs on her. She needed to talk to Jack and find out exactly what was going on with Quindozum Enterprises. There was a chance that the team's disappearance wasn't related to being pulled off investigating it. There was always a chance of anything, even aliens… She grimaced because she knew that chance wasn't so slight after all. What did Jack call them? Snakes.

She wished for the days when she'd thought snakes were dirty politicians and double agents padding their Swiss accounts with payoffs from both sides.

It took an hour to feel confident she had slipped the tail on her. Her hips and knees and ankles all ached from moving faster than her body preferred. She hoped she didn't have a tracker on her clothes. She would just have to work as swiftly as possible, before surveillance could pick her back up. She knew even if she wasn’t tagged, facial recognition and hacked CCTV would be able to uncover where she'd been to some extent. Mr. Beale wasn't the only talented cyber expert, after all.

When she'd completed her cash purchase of burner phones, Hetty found a café open late and ordered a cup of tea. She tapped in the number Jack had given her for emergencies from memory and sat straight and still while she waited for him to answer.

"Who is this?" was the cautious and unfriendly answer she'd been waiting on.

"Auntie."

"Crap."

"Is that any way to talk to your dear tyotia?"

"Yes."

She didn't have time to indulge in Jack's banter. "What is Quindozum?"
"Who?"

"O'Neill," She chided. He sighed. Hetty pursed her lips and asked, "Do they have my team?"

"Do they – what?" Jack cursed quietly. "Didn't you tell them to back off?"

"Perhaps they didn't listen."

"Then there's jack shit I can do. Or even want to. We already screwed the pooch with these people -twice. We are on thin ice and we need them."

She squeezed her eyes shut. "Jack."

"For what is worth, they aren't bad people. If they have your team, they're not hurting them," Jack told her reluctantly.

"Is there anything you can do?"

"Can you get to DC by Friday?"

"I'm already here."

"Sweet. I'll messenger an invite to the shindig at the White House then. Introduce you to some folks that might know how to get back your lost sheep."

Hetty sighed. She'd had her fill of political parties forty years ago. At least she had a proper outfit with her; she was always prepared and never traveled without one formal dress.

"Thank you," she said.
Marty was more grateful than he could express that the space pirates were not keeping him locked up twenty-four/seven with Sam, Kensi and Callen. Callen was being his usual calm self, content to sit back and observe until an opportunity revealed itself, but Sam and Kensi were getting on Marty's last nerve.

He suspected he was affecting them the same way. He didn't expect much from Sam anymore, so that was nothing new, but Kensi hadn't had a civil word to say to him for days.

They'd gone through so much together, as partners, then friends, and finally lovers. They were engaged. Were. He had to wonder if it was now past tense. Something had changed between them. It hadn't happened when Kensi had been struggling to return to full strength and active field duty. That would have almost made sense, if she'd blamed him for something or just been too traumatized to deal with a relationship. Instead, it was just a gradual leaching of warmth from their interactions, a slow increase in his conviction she didn't respect him. In the field. In life. Didn't listen to him. Didn't really know him.

That last thought really hurt. He'd liked her the first time they met, and had fallen in love with her as he grew to know her. She hadn't been impressed with him – typical fed arrogance – but he'd thought that she'd come to understand him.

She'd supported and believed in him when his worst mistakes had come back to haunt him.

He loved her. She loved him. *Had* loved him. Enough to say she would marry him, at least once. He knew that, knew it had been real, but he was afraid that it wasn't enough. His mother had loved his father; she'd even told him that Gordon John Brandel had loved her. It hadn't stopped the man from nearly beating her to death.

He and Kensi were never going to go down that particular road. Marty would blow his own brains out before he raised his hand to a woman or child in anger. Or Kensi would do it for him. It was one of the things that attracted him to her.

But. Yeah. She was so beautiful, inside and out. Even now, in this cell, just looking at her warmed him, made him want to keep her safe and happy. Only he couldn't, because trying to keep Kensi safe was guaranteed to make her unhappy. He knew it but he couldn't stop trying, and it was killing what they had.

Sometimes love was a fire that ran out of fuel.

Maybe they'd run their course. He didn't like thinking that, but wouldn't it be better to face it than not? Before they screwed themselves up pretending feelings that weren't there anymore?

Maybe they needed to not be partners, which would mean not being on the same team… which meant he would have to go, because he didn't need NCIS the way Kensi did. He could go back to law, go back to LAPD or some other department, or even look into a different federal agency.

He couldn't be the one to break it off, though. He had to wait. He wasn't any better at waiting than the rest of the team, leading back to the fact they were all driving each other crazy locked up
together.

But, thank you Jesus, they weren't stuck together in that single cell twenty-four hours a day. Or whatever day length was on the ship. He kept forgetting. Thirty hours? Were they hours? Did they use seconds to measure time? Because that was an Earth thing, like 365 days to a year. It was so weird to think of a concept as immutable as a 'year' being variable.

Marty spread his hands flat over the rec room table in front of him. Lydia Dumais, another person from Earth he'd met on Revenge, had brought him here while the others were in the ship's gym, burning off excess energy. He couldn't access any computers; they needed pass codes, fingerprints, voice prints, and retinal scans in various, random combinations. But here there were cards, games, books, and tablets that weren't networked scattered around the room; all free to use. He put together a couple of decks, despite the different faces, and made up his own elaborate solitaire game. Dumais had received a call from somewhere else in the ship and left him there.

Not by himself, though; there were two guards stationed in the rec room too, but it was still closer to quiet and solitude than he'd had in the brig cell with the team.

Thinking about the team made him think about Kensi and him again, which made him consider him and NCIS. The two were braided together but not inseparable.

If they broke up, could they go on as partners, working together?

Did he even want that?

Did he want to stick with NCIS and the team? Or just NCIS?

He liked NCIS. He'd never had a better boss than Hetty Lange. He believed that most of the time they were doing good - or at least trying to - not playing politics, or feathering their nests, or abusing their authority. But ever since Siderov he had been considering leaving.

Not, no matter what Sam thought, because of the torture. Pain could be endured if it had an end; he'd learned that under his father's fists. Death, injury, did Sam think the military were the only ones who took risks? For sheer pain and possibility of death, neither police nor soldier faced anything like the danger a firefighter did.

No, fuck you, Sam, with your elitist SEAL assumption that anyone else would break. Marty wasn't good enough for Sam Hanna and never would be. He could beat him in a fight, fool him undercover, fight beside him and save his life, endure torture, and it still would never be enough. Sam couldn't help it. Marty knew that and it was why he couldn't be really mad at Sam, because Sam tried hard to be fair and objective, but his unconscious attitude seeped through sometimes. Enough times. It infected the rest of the team. Callen wasn't so bad, but he wasn't great either, and Kensi... Kensi would always venerate the military over civilians.

Marty was never going to be military. Never going to be as good as Kensi's father or her ex-fiancé Jack Simon, poor bastard, never going to measure up to Kensi's ghosts.

He flexed his fingers. The cards laid out before him were foreign and barely recognizable. He'd forgotten which ones he'd designated as jacks and which were queens and kings.

"Damn it," he muttered and swept them all up and shuffled. He didn't need to do more than match them if he played Memory. Anything would be better than going back to the brig. He didn't want to look at Sam or Kensi right now. If he was quiet, he could probably stay here until dinner in the mess.
Unless Sam tried another escape by getting beat up. It was almost a game at this point.

Maybe next time he'd try to take the little Japanese scientist who had caught them in the warehouse...

Maybe she'd shoot him. Marty sure wasn't in the mood to stop her.

He set out the cards face down and began trying to find matches. Memorizing a glimpse accurately was a talent that served a cop well. He tended to progress through the layout of cards systematically as well.

The hatch opened and closed as he deliberated over the card with the funny almost-cat face and two swords. He'd turned over its mate… on the first line or the second?

Jehan Sheppard sat down at the table two seats away. He had a tablet, a bottle of beer, and round, electronic thing the size of a lemon. It wasn't smooth and didn't roll when he set it down.

"Hey," Marty said. Second line third card. He flipped it over with a pleased smile. Gotcha, funny cat-faced thing! The pair of cards moved to the discard pile.

"Hey," Sheppard replied. He sipped his beer and frowned at the tablet. Whatever it said was written in one of those languages that Marty couldn't guess at: Alternative Terran (as he renamed it to remember) probably or Gooey. It didn't appear to be making Sheppard happy, as he sighed and turned off the tablet, then stretched.

"Long day?" Marty asked.

"They're all long at thirty hours," Sheppard replied.

"Right, you do ten-hour shifts." On, Off, and On-Call.

"Yeah," Sheppard drawled, "No point matching planetary time-keeping. It's pretty close to Atlantis' cycle anyway."

Marty rubbed his finger over the back of a card without flipping it over. It was smooth, but not like plastic. A little waxy, with a hint of texture beneath, like cloth. Atlantis. He heard this and that about the place – City? Ship? Nation-State? It seemed to hover somewhere between all of those – like it was the gold standard. No matter where they'd come from: Olesian, Satedan, Athsian, Terran (and those were just the ones Marty remembered; there were a dozen others) … places in the Milky Way and places in the Pegasus Galaxy, everyone talked about Atlantis as more than a home port. The Lost City of the Ancients. It sounded like a video game, really.

"Is it really as great as everyone seems to think?" he asked.

Sheppard sat back in his chair. "It's as close to home as we get." He picked up the piece of tech and juggled it. Lines of blue lit it up inside. "Yeah. It's worth fighting for anyway." He shrugged and rocked forward again. "The surfing sucks though."

"You surf?" Marty blurted.

"Used to. Can't find anyplace outside Earth that does it though. No one knows how to make a decent board and the only place I've seen with really good breakers has this kind of whale-sized jellyfish. You don't go out on the water there."

"I bet you haven't had a chance to catch any waves here either," Marty commiserated. There were a
lot of reasons he'd stayed with LAPD, and beaches and surfing had been one of them. He wasn't about to tour the world surfing, he'd never be at that level, but having the option to go out in the morning and ride a breaker back into the rising sun kept him steady and content sometimes when nothing else did.

"Nope," Sheppard said.

"Damn, wish I could set you up. Maybe you could get a board at least, so if you find a place with good waves, you'll be ready."

Sheppard grinned at him. "Maybe. We're going back down at least once more. Ceremonies and receptions."

Marty made a face. He'd bet Sheppard would rather be surfing than glad-handing politicians and suck-ups. "You could sneak down, though, with your – " he waved his hand, " – zappy beams. Get a board, maybe a good wet suit, too."

Sheppard neither confirmed nor denied, but Marty didn't need him to. He'd figured it out the first day they were on board. The government or this IOA were used to being able to bottleneck access through the stargate. Even with starships, they assumed any aliens wouldn't have a clue how to navigate Earth's cultures without sending up red flags. The Pegasans didn't need the stargate to get around, they could beam down anywhere and move around completely unnoticed since they had people familiar with Earth. They'd just gone around the bottleneck, and let the governments think whatever they wanted.

If that meant the governments of Earth didn't know what the Pegasans had really wanted, well, that wasn't the Pegasans' problem was it? Deeks loved his country, he truly did, but he had never figured out why Americans thought the rest of the world owed them any obedience or concern. A spy for another country owed their loyalty to their country. Soldiers, and citizens, the same. And a lot of people outside of America thought America sucked, not because of its insistence on stuffing its nose in peoples' business, but because it lied to itself. There were a lot of things other countries did better.

"The undersuit to my Kull armor works just fine for that," Sheppard said, snapping Marty's attention back to the conversation.

"Oh."

Marty hadn't seen the Kull armor. He didn't even know what it was, but it sounded crazy cool. So much stuff on this ship was.

"What's that?"

Sheppard flipped the gadget in his hands to Marty. Marty grabbed it one handed and almost dropped it because it tingled. Like an electric shock, only not. He couldn't describe it, only that he felt aware of the thing in some way through his nerves.

He turned it over in his hand. The blue light came through openings in the case. "This isn't radioactive or anything, right? I'm not going to turn blue and start crawling up walls from handling it am I?"

"No," Sheppard said. He was staring at Marty intently. "It's an information storage device. Just some Alteran grunt's journal, it turns out."

Boring.
Marty handed it back. Sheppard turned it in his hand then the light went off. Marty thought the gadget felt sad or something. Weird.

"You know, there might be surfing somewhere in Pegasus," Sheppard said. "Even Atlantis. The mainland has a lot of coast line and the big fish things we've found aren't interested in eating people."

"Definitely should get a board before you go back then," Marty told him.

"And Atlantis is amazing, beautiful and dangerous; it's like it's alive for some of us," Sheppard added. "You’d get to fly. It's even better than surfing."

Marty opened his mouth, closed it, went over Sheppard's last words again. "Is this a recruiting pitch?"

"Space, the final frontier," Sheppard intoned solemnly.

Marty sat back in his chair, cards forgotten, and gaped. Why him? "What about the others?"

"I don't think they'd want to come with us, do you?"

"What – no." Sam had his kids. Callen wouldn't leave Sam. Plus he had his weird thing with Anya Kolcheck, however that worked. Kensi...

Kensi.

"I'm engaged. To Kensi."

Sheppard's eyebrows went up. He hadn't known.

"Okay."

"Just okay?" Marty asked.

Sheppard shrugged. "I'm not trying to sell you a used car. It's an option. You have the right to decline. Okay."

"Okay," Mart repeated. He swept up the cards. He needed to see Kensi and talk to her. "I think I'll go to the gym."

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**Callen**

The team was too tense.

Deeks was doing his best to charm everyone, which was what an undercover operator did, Callen was playing the same game, but Kensi was treating Deeks like a traitor, and Sam –

Okay, Callen couldn't admit it to anyone, but inside, he thought it was hysterical.

Sam had his ass handed to him by Ronon Dex.

Ronon Dex and then a huge guy called Til, who dragged Sam back by his scruff like a momma cat
with a recalcitrant kitten. Ronon Dex, Til, then Haemi, who was as tall as Dex, just as muscled, and pound for pound twice as mean. Even Kensi, who was on Sam's side, had enjoyed watching Haemi wipe the deck with Sam, because as a demonstration of skill at hand-to-hand it was a thing of beauty.

Plenty of the crew had watched too, cramming in at both ends of the corridor where the fight broke out. No money changed hands that Callen could see. No one would bet against Haemi.

When she was done, Haemi wasn't as courteous as Til. She told Callen and Kensi and Deeks to carry Sam back to the cell.

That really should have been the end of it, but Sam had to try it one more time, with someone smaller than him this time, because he really was that singleminded and desperate to get back his kids. When Michelle was alive, he'd been steadier, easier, because he knew they had her to count on.

Logically, Callen supposed that trying against someone smaller was an improvement on Sam's odds, but like the lady told the dwarf, size doesn't matter if you know what you're doing.

Teyla knew what she was doing.

It bothered Callen that Sam had attacked Teyla, and he could see it pressed more than one of Deeks' buttons too; it was like if Sam had attacked Nell. It probably reminded Deeks of his father's violence. In any case, Teyla floored Sam, broke his wrist and dislocated his shoulder. When she finally let him up, she marched him to the medical bay where Melena fixed him up.

"You need to stop, Sam," Callen told him back in their bare cell. They were going to end up confined - no gym, no mess hall, no door that opened - if Sam didn't get hold of himself.

"I know," Sam agreed.

"Good. Good to know. Slow and steady wins the race." He shut up because he was starting to sound like an idiot.

Kensi was fussing over Sam's arm in its sling. Deeks had settled at the far side of the cell. Callen was in the middle. He thought that probably described the team too damn well.

"You want us to just sit back, G?" Sam demanded.

"For now. They said at the beginning they were going to let us go."

"It's not like they asked for our parole," Kensi pointed out.

"No."

Sam nodded at his arm. "Not like I'm going to be much use in a fight anyway."

"If we're good, maybe they'll let us call Hetty."

"So she can chew us out and tell us we can sit and simmer until it's time to be sent back home," Deeks muttered. It was a decent estimate of how things would likely shake down.

"Think they're going to send us all back?" Sam asked. He gestured at Deeks. "They're practically courting Surfer Boy."

"You think I've got Stockholm Syndrome or something?" Deeks asked. "Like I'm going to defect?"
Sam gave him a scornful look.

"I'm doing my job."

"You get into it too far," Sam said. "Especially when you like the mark."

He had a point. It was easy to like the Pegasan crew.

Callen got it now, though. Sam was okay with short-term undercover, faking out the bad guys, but he wasn't comfortable with living, breathing, being a bad guy to get in with them. Deeks had been Max Gentry, among others, so long and so well the identity threatened to swallow him. Part of why he'd been good with becoming OSP's liaison with LAPD was getting out from deep cover ops.

Because Deeks was smart and he knew two things happened to people who were under too long: they burned out or they burned up. Sometimes both.

Sam knew that too and Sam shared the attitude the FBI used to have about undercover work: what kind of person could slide into another skin so flawlessly? They had to be that kind of person, didn't they? It wasn't true, but it was a hard idea to dig out when most people didn't know they thought it in the first place.

Deep cover operatives had to either be so fluid they could pour themselves into the mold, or have an unbreakable core identity that was diamond hard.

Callen knew, because in many ways, he was the first kind. He'd had no real sense of himself, no place or family, and it let him imagine himself as anyone he needed to be for an op. His sense of self had solidified as time passed, especially after working with Gibbs and then Hetty. Part of it was time, too, experience shaping personality until it lost the plasticity that made for a talented undercover operator.

There was a reason Hetty hadn't had him doing anything long term in years and even those ops weren't twenty-four/seven. He wasn't alone, the team was always there, there was always a lifeline back to who he really was.

Deeks was the other sort. He'd found his center when he was a kid and followed his beliefs ever since. It held him steady on course no matter how far under he'd gone – that was why he hadn't been subsumed in Gentry or any other lowlife cover.

Sam got that but didn't want to. Couldn't give Deeks credit for having a kind of strength Sam didn't. No, not that Sam didn't – that Sam was afraid he didn't have.

Which meant that there was nothing Deeks could ever do to win Sam over, because the whole problem was with Sam, not Deeks.

Callen said it again in his head. Shit.

Sam wasn't wrong about the Revenge crew doing their best to pull Deeks in, though. They wanted Deeks. They didn't care about Sam or Kensi or Callen. They weren't nasty to them or anything, they just weren't interested in them.

Being wanted like that… offered a place, a tight family… well, Callen knew exactly how heady and seductive that was.

It wasn't like Deeks was carrying the ugly ball for the team, but Callen had to admit they were used to all drawing their share of attention. Kensi was stunning, he knew how to be charming, and Sam
dominated most rooms without saying a word. Deeks usually contented himself playing the clown, saying something dumb just so one of them could dig in a barb in response and feel better.

Many teams had a whipping boy, but not all, and not the best. It couldn't be sustained long term. If an agent was truly incompetent, they couldn't be tolerated long, and if they weren't… they wouldn't tolerate being disrespected for no good reason.

Callen didn't think Deeks would change sides, even with the current tension and dissention on the team. Even if Kensi cut him loose. He wasn't all that sure it would matter, though.

It might have been a joke, but he'd heard McKay say Mal Doran had stolen Sheppard and decided to keep him.

He was worried she might decide to keep Deeks.

Kensi patted Sam's shoulder and went over to Deeks. She sat close to him and bent her head nearer, but her posture was stiff. It wasn't intimacy so much as a desire to be private.

Callen waved Sam over to him and started ragging on him about getting beat up by a woman half his size. Sam gave as good as he got. They both did their best to not listen to whatever was going on between Kensi and Deeks.

Bits and pieces still came through in the intervals between their own words. Whispers carried weirdly in the bare room.

"– can't just keep going like this –"

"– want then?"

"I don't know! Just try backing off –"

Ouch. Deeks' expression, what Callen could see of it, was going blank. The inscrutable mask kids learned early in shitty homes, emotions turned off and pain tucked away where it couldn't be seen and used against them. Yeah, Callen knew the drill. He'd recognized Marty Deeks as one of them long before he'd known his particular story.

"Fine," Deeks said, loud enough there was no pretending they hadn't heard. "Consider me backed off. You want space? You've got it."

Aw, Kensi. What the fuck did you just do?

Radek

Radek would be happy to bid good-bye to Quindozum Enterprises. To his own surprise he would be just as happy to leave Earth behind again, too. It was the planet of his birth, but it was not home.

Atlantis had his loyalty; Revenge was his home, even if he and Miko and Lindsay were commanding Aurora.

He had enjoyed their visit to Earth though, in ways he hadn't expected. Perhaps he had been around Vala too long. Outsmarting the authorities and being in command of their operation had both had been so satisfying.

Even the infiltration of their beam-up point by NCIS agents hadn't been disastrous. He was
unhappy about it, but no one had been harmed. They would send the agents back soon enough.

Most of them anyway. Rumors ran through starships just as fast as they did anywhere else and he'd heard one of the agents had a strong expression of the ATA gene. It was one of the things they hadn't explained to their prisoners.

McKay had even chimed in. "Thank God, it's the one with half a brain."

"You like him?" Radek asked in near disbelief. McKay didn't 'like' people, he just considered some of them tolerable.

"Stackhouse might need to up his game," McKay said.

Radek looked at him wide-eyed. Sergeant Stackhouse had been sharing Vala's bed on and off since they took Atlantis from the Genii. No one thought they were permanent, but Vala hadn't expressed serious interest in anyone else. Perhaps there was more to the NCIS agent than Radek had noticed.

They moved on to discussing the series of articles and letters shredding current scientific idiocies that they planned to submit for publication just before leaving Sol System.

"The IOA may try to block publication," Radek pointed out. Censorship was alive and well on Earth.

"I'm more worried that the morons calling themselves the peer review will bury everything," McKay replied.

"A lot of people will be embarrassed, even unemployed, once this step forward is disseminated through the community," Radek agreed. "You really think they might bury – " He stopped and laughed at himself. Of course they would. Stupidity bred desperation and desperation fed stupidity.

"We'll need to bypass – "

"I already wrote up a neat little hack. If they don't publish the proofs, it will override and send instructions to the printers with amended versions," McKay said. "The e-journals are even easier to handle." He scowled. "A few things I plan to send directly to people who can actually grasp the math. The ones we didn't recruit, anyway."

The hatch behind McKay opened and Jehan walked in. He looked better than he had when they'd rescued him, Vala and Teyla in France, but Radek still worried. For Jehan, being back in Ba'al's hands must have been as horrific as being captured by the Genii again would be for Radek. Acastus Kolya had stalked through his nightmares again for the last week; he could guess who dominated Jehan's bad dreams.

McKay glanced up from his work and mustered a smile for Jehan, who folded himself into a chair next him without saying anything. Radek nodded to him and he nodded back. He would say nothing unless Jehan did first; he knew sometimes silent companionship was a truer comfort than words.

"The recruiting went well," he mentioned instead.

It had. The process was much easier since they weren't strangled in red tape and ridiculous security concerns denying them the best minds because someone smoked a joint once or their great grandparents were communists or fascists or some other -ist that was currently unacceptable.

There were no Kavanaughhs among them, though, no one bought their way to Atlantis with backstabbing and incompetence papered over with ass-kissing. They had screened for more than
credentials; multiple interviews had provided the opportunity to discover whether potential recruits were actually competent in their fields in addition to having flexible minds and the ability to work with others under high stress.

"It did?"

Radek nodded. "Some difficulties with a family not being as enthusiastic for a one-way trip, but a surprising number of parents and children. In several cases, even grandparents, brothers, sisters, and extended kin."

"Maybe it's the frontier fantasy," McKay commented.

"There really isn't anywhere on the planet left to get out from under some government's thumb," Jehan commented.

McKay looked at him thoughtfully.

"You know, if they ever let the existence of the stargate slip, everyone and their monkey will be clamoring to find their own planet to create their 'perfect' world," he said.

Radek agreed.

"Brain drain."

"Whacko fanatic dumbass drain too," McKay replied. He hrmphed. "That'd be one way to solve over-population."

"Most colonies fail without extensive support and trade to support their economies," Radek had to comment.

"Not my problem. Thank God." McKay cycled through several windows of data, flipped back to the actual engine data stream, then typed for several minutes. "Garbage in, garbage out."

"That's rather Malthusian," Jehan remarked. Radek agreed, though there were days when he thought the stupid deserved to suffer from their stupidity rather than be safeguarded. He had to remind himself that that attitude penalized the ignorant too. And everyone was stupid about something, sooner or later.

"Oh, I'm not saying throw them to metaphorical wolves," McKay said. "At best you'd get rid of a generation of idiots, but… I'm not cruel enough to condemn their kids. They'd probably be morons too, but genius can sprout in the strangest soil."

"One wouldn't want to lose out on a genius," Radek said dryly.

"Exactly!"

Jehan made an undignified snorfling noise that was smothered laughter and McKay looked indignant but also pleased. Radek sat back to enjoy the show, equally amused and relieved that the Mer and Jehan banter and sarcasm had survived another ordeal. Maybe it was how they survived their ordeals.

"You ready for the signing?" Jehan asked when he'd recovered his poise.

"Thank God I will not have to be there," Radek muttered, which made McKay glare at him since he would.
"Oh, yes, because I need to witness them putting ink to paper – in the digital age – on the 'Preliminary Pegasus Peace Process'." McKay mimed air quotes.

"It's the Preliminary Pegasus Accords," Jehan corrected. His mouth ticked up. "Someone must have noticed the other was Pee Pee Pee Pee."

"Much more accurate. I bet they have one idiot lawyer assigned just to make sure they don't end up with embarrassing acronyms," McKay said.

Radek laughed. "And another one to make sure it doesn't translate into something embarrassing."

McKay's mouth stretched into an evil grin. "Jackson's their only real Alteran translator. Do you think he's checking to make sure they don't end up signing the Ancient equivalent of the POOP agreement?"

Each of them sniggered.


"Preliminary Optional Official Pact," Radek chimed in.

"That makes no sense!" McKay objected.

"That's why it would be perfect."


Jehan rose to his feet with a regretful sigh. He clapped McKay on the shoulder. "Come on, Mer, we need to go to this meeting with the IOA. Vala's going to rip them a new one for the Ba'al thing. Someone needs to reign her in."

"What, us!?" McKay exclaimed in disbelief.

"You don't want to miss when she tells them they aren't getting *Tempestas* because they have Goa'uld running around loose, do you?"

McKay's grin turned evil. "Oh, you're right. I'd forgotten about that. We wouldn't want Vala to upset them – without being there to watch."
Chapter 16

Gibbs

He wasn't the only one seething after Vance told them they were off the London case. Even Reeves was furious. Four goddamn weeks, digging and digging for any kind of lead. In the end, they had everything and nothing. Stymied.

All his damn 'witnesses' had left the country. Gibbs had protested, but the British wouldn't hold them, and he couldn't. He didn't have that kind of pull.

That pissed him off as much as failing to solve the damn case did.

Gibbs would have pushed forward – meant to, anyway, but the British threw them out of the country. They showed up at the NCIS office with the team's things from their hotel already packed and loaded in their vehicles and 'escorted' them to Lakenheath, where Marines were waiting to walk them onto the USN aircraft that took them back the US. Their files and computers were confiscated with promises the personal items would be returned.

He didn't have much faith in that.

Now he didn't even have a goddamn phone.

Vance met them at the airbase, looking as sour as Gibbs had ever seen him.

"Believe me," Vance stated, "I don't like this any more than you. But I have been informed that if you so much as run a Google search related to this case, I will be relieved as Director and everyone involved will be detained. Indefinitely."

"They have you running scared," Gibbs said scornfully.

"It might surprise you, Gibbs, but I'm not sure I would be sorry if I was fired," Vance said. They were standing together on the tarmac, watching as the Marines, who had been stone-faced and silent through the flight, unloaded the team's gear.

It was morning, one of the days with fast moving scattered showers where you could be being rained on while the sun shone through the clouds a foot away. Vance was standing to the side of an oily puddle. Rain beaded on his mirror-shined Oxfords. Gusts of chill wind tugged at their clothes like an impatient child.

Gibbs usually liked weather like this. He was too jet-lagged and pissed to appreciate the frisky breeze tangling Bishop's hair and snapping the flags out.

The rain had washed some of the aviation fuel reek from the air, and he appreciated that. But, damn, he was getting too old to hare off across the Atlantic and back. He could feel it in his aching back, along with every scar and wound he'd ever endured. When the hell had he gotten old?

"I could spend a little more time with my kids – "

Gibbs squeezed his eyes closed against the old pain, the memory, the loss -
"What scares me is what happens when I'm out. What political crony gets installed to dance to the administration's jig. Granger's screwed the pooch with that mess with the North Koreans. Lange's got more enemies than friends in the Beltway. You're past retirement age for a field agent, but you'd be a nightmare riding a desk. There's no one else in-house, so it would be an appointee."

"An apparatchik," Gibbs agreed, cringing inside at the reality. Vance was right. Not only would a new Director come from outside the service, but they would almost assuredly be chosen for a lack of experience.

"I know you don't think much of me, but I have done my best to keep NCIS independent and successful, and to take care of its people."

"I know."

"Do me the favor of at least thinking before you bull ahead and destroy not only your team's careers and maybe their lives, but this entire agency."

"Those Marines deserve justice."

"They do, but is that really what you're after? Or are you just frustrated that someone took 'your' case?"

"Damn you, Leon."

"Take the weekend off. You haven't been assigned any other cases since you flew out. May as well take advantage."

Gibbs grumbled something and stalked toward the cars waiting for them.

Vance's phone bleeped. The wind and a helicopter spooling up somewhere close tore the words away before Gibbs could make them out until Vance's voice rose. "All of them? How long? Damn it, Henrietta!"

Gibbs stopped. He didn't want to listen, but he couldn't stop himself. Not when he'd heard that name. The Duchess of Deception. Their tyotia. Their Baba Yaga, more like, he thought sourly, in her chicken-footed house flying through the night. All her gifts bought with blood.

The witch never lied about the price, but he'd told himself it would be his blood, and he'd had no problem with that. His forefinger twitched. Take the shot.

"Gibbs!" Vance shouted.

He turned back and braced himself. "What, Leon?"

"Four OSP agents missing in LA. I want you and your people out there. Coordinate with Hetty."

"Who?"

"Callen's team."

Everything was loaded onto a plane again; clothes, equipment, team. They were exhausted after four weeks of ramming their heads into a wall, but that was brushed away with the news of an entire team of operators gone missing – NCIS people, their people.
The plane was being refueled and another crew had to be scrambled for it, so Gibbs had some time to find out some background.

In a shocking development, they did get their computers and phones returned, through Vance pulling some strings.

"Don't make me sorry," Vance said.

"Would I do that?" Gibbs asked.

Vance rolled his eyes.

"McGee, get everything the LA office has put together," Gibbs ordered. McGee was practically molesting his laptop. "Check that thing and the rest for bugs!"

McGee's head jerked up and his eyes widened. "Yes, boss!"

"How long have they been missing?" he asked Vance.

"Apparently seven days. Hetty's office thought they would either turn up on their own or they would find them."

"And today's when you found out an entire team had disappeared?" Gibbs didn't know whether to be angry at Vance or that Vance had been kept in the dark. He settled on both.

"Granger decided they should keep it in-house, since none of them had been working an active case."

"Four agents don't vanish coincidentally."

"No."

"I want to talk to Hetty," Gibbs said to Vance. "Why was this Granger's call?"

"Because Hetty is here in DC."

"And the LA office has been keeping her in the dark too. Jesus fucking Christ."

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**Jehan**

The East Room of the White House held more people than Jehan liked, or maybe it was that they were mostly people he didn't like. At least half of them were hangers on ignorant of the truth behind the reception, present to curry favor.

He didn't want pictures of himself with the President or pictures of himself at all. He didn't enjoy going through three separate metal detectors when they'd arrived at the Southeast gate. It was hot with too many people stuffed in limited space. The room was overdone with gilt, ivory, crystal chandeliers overhead and golden-swagged drapery at the windows. Perfumes and colognes were at war in the air. Washington DC stunk anyway; Jehan’s nose wasn't oblivious to the urban reek of garbage, people, and petroleum products any longer.

Women were in formal gowns in glowing colors, men in dress uniforms and tuxedos. Medals and
jewelry gleamed on every chest. Every hand held a crystal flute of champagne or a tumbler of liquor.

It wasn't much different than the parties Patrick Sheppard had thrown. Too many jackals, too much over-the-top display of wealth on a planet where people still went hungry. He hadn't liked it as a kid; he despised it now.

There were too many people for a sit-down dinner. There were some scattered bar-height tables, but very few chairs. The women in their high heels would be suffering before the evening was over. At least the bar was open and the food plentiful and excellent at the buffet set up in the State Dining Room.

The guests here were selected based on security clearance and what they had to offer the administration, rather than just wealth and social position, but within that smaller circle they weren't much different from his father's cronies. There were more intellectuals and international representatives, soldiers, and scientists than his father would ever have tolerated, and some of the plus-ones were interesting people.

O'Neill had brought Hollis Mann as his date. Jackson had come with Elizabeth Weir, but the rest of SG-1 hadn't been invited. Jehan doubted it was out of concern for his discomfort around Teal'c, but he appreciated not having that prim'ta buzz adding to his nerves.

The Russian ambassador and his wife were hobnobbing with the President and the First Lady. It was more interesting that the Russian defense attaché, Metzov, had brought Svetlana Markova as his plus-one. To match Mer and the SGC's elite scientists? To show that Russia was just as scientifically au courant? To translate esoteric physics for the Ambassador as necessary? Or as a reward to her? All the above, or none? She'd greeted Mer in Russian and he'd spent twenty minutes debating obscure mathematical formulae with her before he allowed her to extract a promise to meet for coffee somewhere with whiteboards somewhere they could slip surveillance, at least audio, and Mer could pitch her a new life in Atlantis. She was one of the scientists Radek's Quindozum operation hadn't been able to reach without drawing undo attention.

She was more interesting than the politicians and CEOs and lobbyist cockroaches.

Scientists and military aside, this was just the sort of gathering Jehan's father worked hard to be invited to attend: two or three shots of Scotch and a handshake could get him a chance to bid on an exclusive manufacturing opportunity. If someone got a little loose-lipped, even better. Patrick would never be crass or sloppy enough to draw the SEC's attention, but even a hint at what was coming would let him position his companies to take the best advantage.

It wasn't anything Jehan enjoyed. Too much politicking, not enough raucous fun. The Satedans and Athosians, they knew how to gather everyone together in a party that included fun.

Plus, ruus wine. Nothing on Earth compared.

He smirked into his champagne flute at the thought.

Tuxedos came in more colors and fabrics than he remembered, but most were still black, like the one he wore. Vala had it tailored to him in London, along with two suits; it was sleek yet conservative.

The cummerbund was made from a bronze silk they brought from Pegasus. Everyone attending
from Pegasus wore some of it. It had one especially interesting quality: it was opaque to metal detectors.

Jehan had a hand stunner hidden at his waist, along with some odds and ends he'd always carried since his tenure as a lo'taur. Poisons, garrotes, and an Altran version of a switch blade. He'd found it in Aurora's armory, but it was clearly a personal item. Almost too small for his hand, it was made of a non-metallic alloy and inlaid with a design in what looked like abalone. A touch to a button on the base and it extruded a comb. A thought of 'knife' from someone with the ATA and it flicked open a vicious little blade, sharp on both sides and somehow long enough to slide between an enemy's ribs to their heart.

Some singer who’d apparently become famous while Jehan was gone from Earth stood with the United States Marine Band, crooning nineteen-forties classics to their accompaniment.

Teyla had on a high fashion sari-inspired dress and was gliding through a waltz with O'Neill. Jehan and Mer had conspired with Radek and Peter to teach her a variety of ballroom dances. Vala had only been interested in the samba and the tango. Jehan doubted she would get any of the fuddy-duddy generals or politicians to shake their booty with her.

Probably couldn't get the band to play a samba or rhumba anyway. Their loss. Literally. A bored Vala would probably pickpocket the people who annoyed her most.

He watched the dance floor. O'Neill was a dab hand on the dance floor, befitting an officer and a gentleman. Teyla was always graceful in everything she did. With a more confident partner than Mer, she floated, smiling serenely. It was a relief to see her enjoying herself and a pleasure to watch them both.

His own shoulders were tense. He hadn't left Revenge's safety since escaping from Ba'al's chateau. But if he'd refused to attend, it would have given away that he'd been badly affected by the kidnapping. He would not give Ba'al or anyone else that satisfaction.

Mer had decided to stick to him like glue, not caring if that gave away how upset he'd been. Jehan had heard part of one recording of what Mer had threatened to do to O'Neill and Earth if they weren't found immediately and all right. It was probably a good thing Mer had gone straight to O'Neill. No one in the IOA would have responded happily to the prospect of being snatched with an Asgard beam and then erased from the buffer.

Mer slurped down the last canapé from his tiny plate, handed it to a passing server, and looked around the crowd. Probably for more hors d'oeuvres; he'd never been able to enjoy no longer having deadly allergies, and was indulging in all things citrus with a sort of spiteful delight.

Whatever he saw, it wasn't food; Jehan felt him stiffen and hiss under his breath.

"Oh, I cannot believe that incompetent jackass is here. I mean, Nye, fine, he's not exactly a physicist, but there is a certain skill to educating rugrats about science. It's not like he's a media whore like Greene and Tyson, but Tunney? He's a hack. He never had an original thought in his life," Mer declared. He wasn’t quite at full volume but his voice did carry. It garnered a gasp or two from several other attendees within earshot.

Jehan nudged his elbow against Mer's. "You're shocking the other guests." He smiled, though, not particularly bothered himself.

"And I care, why?"
Jehan laughed because why not?

The IOA didn't know *Tempestas* was off the negotiating table so everyone was still fake-smiling with gritted teeth, and the Pegasan delegation, along with high mucky-mucks from all the member nations, were attending a celebratory reception. There was very little they could do or say that wouldn't be swallowed with the way the IOA was salivating for the Alteran warship.

Tunney had several people around him and was clearly lecturing them. Jehan can see the glaze over their eyes from across the East Room.

"Ignore him, he's an idiot and he doesn't even know it," Jehan said.

Mer made an outraged noise.

In an under tone, speaking the mishmash Corrigan had sourly dubbed Peglish, Jehan promised, "Special delivery flaming feces and articles that destroy all his theories. Before we leave." Because where was the satisfaction if you didn't get to see and hear the wailing and gnashing of teeth?

A portly but dignified gentleman in a general's dress uniform cut in on O'Neill's second dance with Teyla. He looked familiar and O'Neill handed Teyla into his care with a genuine smile. The general led her into another waltz. The overhead lights caught his features at a different angle as they turned and Jehan realized he knew him.

That was General George Hammond, his last commander, who had overseen Cheyenne Mountain when Apophis came through the Stargate. He knew from Mer that Hammond had led the Stargate Program until his retirement, though briefly replaced by Elizabeth Weir at one point, then O'Neill, and when O'Neill was promoted to a second star and DC, General Landry had taken over and now worked in tandem with Weir.

He plucked another champagne flute for himself and chugged the fizzy stuff down. Hammond had been a distant figure, but a good senior officer as far as Jehan was concerned.

He wondered if Hammond would remember him.

Or would O'Neill have told Hammond who he was?

"What?" Mer asked. "Oh, that's Hammond. Who knew he could dance?"

The waltz ended and Teyla unerringly found where the two of them were standing. Earlier, they were the object of interest to the other party-goers, but Jehan's resolute silence and Mer's acerbic comments had driven everyone away. Once they were ostracized, the reception had become tolerable. Neither of them was a diplomat, and neither of them wanted to be. That was Teyla's job.

The band began something with a faster, modern tempo. Vala dragged a young major onto the dance floor. He looked like stunned rabbit and whatever dance Vala was attempting, it wasn't a waltz. Jehan thought she was trying to lead; it was hard to tell. The shiny black tassels that made up her entire dress shifted to reveal shocking stretches of skin with her every move. She plastered herself against the major and he caught her and then spun her out to the end of their arms in a surprising move.

Vala tipped her head back and laughed in delight. The one white streak in her hair had come loose from her updo and fell across her eyes. Jehan was struck by how beautiful she really was, how much she meant to him, the way she could be hard and cruel and silly and understanding from moment to moment.
Maybe it was the encounter with Ba'al, maybe it was seeing Hammond, but he realized how much she'd done for him.

How much they'd done together.

"Ugh," Mer muttered and snapped Jehan out of his reverie.

Teyla was leading Hammond toward them. Her smile never slipped, but she caught Jehan's attention, and he knew if he tried to duck away she would hunt him to the ends of the galaxy and make him pay by *shaming* him. He never should have struck up a friendship with her. She had this way of making him and everyone else do what they ought.

Hammond and Teyla arrived and Jehan summoned up a social smile for them.

"George says he knows you," Teyla greeted them. She had her hand on Hammond's arm. She switched to Jehan. Her touch was light but meant to hold him there.

"George!" Mer choked.

"Dr. McKay," Hammond replied. "It's too little and too late, but we should never have taken the Tok'ra's word at face value. We owed you better."

Mer coughed and shrugged and then sighed. "I can't think of anything you could have done, actually, once Jolinar took me over."

Jehan lifted his eyebrows. Oh really? Up to now, Mer had been bitter and resentful toward everyone in the SGC.

Hammond straightened to attention. "The SGC should have done more."

"What, chased after Jolinar all over the Milky Way?" Mer asked dismissively.

"We gave every effort to recovering Sha're Jackson." Hammond was looking at Jehan while he spoke. Mer sneaked a quick look too. Jehan just shrugged at him.

"I knew what I was getting into," Mer said eventually. He grimaced and added, "Jackson's wife was… an innocent bystander. Comparatively. And Amunet would have been worse than Jolinar."

Jolinar was bad enough, Jehan thought.

"I still wish the SGC and I personally had done things differently," Hammond said steadily. Real regret showed on his wide face.

"Mer," prompted Teyla.

Mer rolled his eyes before saying stiffly, "Apology, personal apology, strictly yours, accepted." He handed Jehan his champagne flute and extended his hand to Hammond.

Hammond responded with a small smile, a nod, and took Mer's hand. They shook once, then Mer was stepping back to Jehan's side and Hammond switched his attention to him.

Jehan could have done without that.

"Do you remember me?" Hammond asked him.

"O'Neill couldn't keep his mouth shut," Jehan replied. "He really is a jackass."

"I recognize you," he said and added, "I remember everything. After a while it doesn't mean anything. Enough time in a sarcophagus will do that to you." Let Hammond chew on that.

Hammond accepted that and stood quietly. Jehan watched him for a minute, then switched his attention back to the milling crowd and the dancers. Vala's major had gone from gobsmacked to bewitched, a common progression around her. O'Neill was dancing with a woman hardly taller than a child. She moved well, but with a stiff care that came with age, and O'Neill touched her like she was brittle.

Jehan felt frayed and fragile himself. He didn't want to deal with this, with Hammond, with who he'd been before. Before. It wasn't relevant, he insisted in his head.

"Major John Sheppard is still officially deceased," Hammond said softly.

"Leave him that way."

Why resurrect John Sheppard? It wouldn't shift his loyalties. He wouldn't betray Vala and Mer, Revenge's crew, or the other Pegasans if his father and brother were threatened.

Or maybe the unspoken threat was that someone might tell Patrick and Dave that John was alive?

He didn't want to see his father or his brother. What could it accomplish to tear open old wounds? If his father had been dissatisfied with Major Sheppard, how would he react to Jehan, ex-lo'taur, pirate pilot, back from the dead, with a male lover and no chance in hell of ever fulfilling whatever plans or dreams Patrick Sheppard had planned for him? It would just be ugly.

And Dave? Dave would just be confused and hurt and bitter.

Jehan would do them all a favor and stay the hell away. He'd learned from Vala's stories of going back to her birth planet when she was freed of Qetesh. If someone in the SGC or IOA leaked his survival to his biological family, he could and would do nothing about it. He wouldn't be here.

Hammond hadn't moved. The gentle look on his face made Jehan uncomfortable.

"I suppose that might be best," Hammond murmured. He sounded regretful. "I think he was a good officer, though, what I knew of him. I'm very sorry that the Air Force, and Earth, lost him."

Before Jehan had to find some reply, O'Neill and his dance partner joined them. Jehan gave him a dirty look.

"Henrietta Lange, General George Hammond," O'Neill introduced her. He waved to the rest of them. "Meredith McKay, Jehan abd-Ba'al, Teyla Emmagan."

Jehan raised his eyebrows. O'Neill had given their real names and not the ones on their Maltese passports. He'd didn't bother saying he wasn't going by abd-Ba'al any longer.

Henrietta Lange had never been a beauty, but time had shaped her features into something more real and interesting than mere prettiness. Heavy, round glasses magnified her crow bright eyes, and though she wore a heavy, dark red pants suit that must have been designed to fit and flatter her, her make-up was minimal, and her dull brown hair was in a no-frills bob that could have just as easily been a wig.
"Retired, Jack," Hammond corrected. He took Henrietta's hand and bent over it gallantly. Her smile in return was wry, but she clearly appreciated the courtly gesture. "Please, Ms. Lange, call me George."

"Only if you call me Hetty," she said in a wonderful, dry as dust tone that was still filled with mirth.

_Hetty._

Not a lot of Henrietta Langes in the world, moving at this level, Jehan thought, so this must be NCIS team's legendary Hetty. Deeks had mentioned her by name. Not to Jehan, but overheard to his team mates, to wit: _Hetty told us to leave it alone, so she must know what is going on._ He eyed her with respect.

Teyla gave him a look that communicated that he should deal with the diminutive personage, since it was his planet. And Mer's, of course, but Mer would be rude and potentially disastrous. Mer's talents were multitudinous but diplomacy and negotiation were not among them.

"Ms. Lange," Jehan said quietly when she focused on him, picking up Teyla's silent cue. "I think I've met some of your associates."

Her mouth pursed, but she only nodded once. Her attention, though, was intense. Jehan felt like he'd been painted with a targeting laser.

"One of them recommended a surf shop; I'm hoping he'll have time to take me there before returning to work."

Mer's eyes had gone wide at the roundabout communication. He opened his mouth, but snapped it shut immediately when Teyla squeezed his arm. O'Neill snorted a covert laugh. "Yeah, those forced vacations are something else."

"It all depends on the accommodations," Jehan told him. "Two out of three like ours so well they join the crew." Considering the Ori shitfest, O'Neill probably wished he'd left Jackson behind in Atlantis too. For a smart guy, Daniel didn't consider consequences as much as he should. Maybe it was the genius thing; Mer said he used to be even worse than Jackson.

It was not just a dig at O'Neill, either. Deeks had skills beyond the ATA that Atlantis could use: interpersonal, criminal investigation, and covert ops. With the constant influx of immigrants and traders, Atlantis would need more than the military to handle the inevitable petty and sometimes serious squabbles that were part of any group of humans.

O'Neill gave him a weird, pained smile, Hammond winced, Mer snickered and Teyla huffed out an almost silent, 'I am so through with you' breath. Hetty looked thoughtful.

"I see," she said. "How long do you anticipate this vacation lasting?"

Jehan shrugged. "Another week?"

"Sounds about right," O'Neill agreed amiably. "Things are winding up."

"Dr. Weir and Ms. Wray have our provisional schedule," Teyla said.

They'd be the ones getting things done. Strom and Coolidge and the other IOA reps had been too busy objecting to Vala's antics. It let the women get matters organized and accomplished. They were around somewhere, probably glaring at Vala while she danced.
"Unfortunately, the matter has spread beyond my own purview," Hetty said, her attention drawn to one of the entrances to the East Room.

Jehan followed his gaze. Hollis Mann and several Secret Service agents were arguing with a silver-haired man trying to get in.

"Is that - ?" Mer started.

Gibbs, Jehan identified him.

"Oh, for cryin' out loud!" O'Neill exclaimed. "That's Jethro. What the hell is he trying to pull now?"

Jethro? Jehan mouthed in astonishment. Did O'Neill know the man beyond a name on a file?

"The investigator from London?" Teyla asked. She couldn't see anything from where she stood, and wouldn't even if she'd been a foot taller. The Secret Service were doing a good job of keeping Gibbs from escalating the scene into something that impacted the guests.

"Dear God," Hetty murmured.

"Goddamn Marine wouldn't know discreet if it hit him over the head with a nuke," O'Neill remarked, frustration but not dislike coloring his words. "He's like a dog with a bone."

"I'm afraid this is in regard to my missing team," Hetty said.

"Vacationing," Mer said.

"At the Hotel Graybar," O'Neill volleyed back. "Vance sicced him on you to get him off the London thing, didn't he?"

"I expect so. Leon has been cutting me out recently – I imagine he informed Assistant Director Mosely."

"Someone's cutting you out?" Jehan blurted. "Sounds screwy."

Hetty smiled at him primly. "Thank you, but I'm told my time has come and gone. My skills are 'out-dated' in the digital age. No place for a Cold War relic."

He wondered who she was quoting. Leon, whoever the hell he was? It sure wasn't Callen's team, and O'Neill seemed to respect the hell out of her too. O'Neill didn't respect just anyone, no matter how high up the chain of command they were.

Teyla looked outraged. "Fools. My people know the value of elders." Athosians didn't have many in the way of older people, hadn't even before the culling and scattering that followed before their remnants allied with Sam's people and made it to Atlantis. Charin was the oldest Jehan had ever seen among them. Teyla had been sad for a long time after the old woman passed. She'd been grateful to have survived long enough to see Charin again, not to mention that Charin had achieved the rarest of Pegasus deaths: that of natural causes.

Though animal and even Wraith attack should be considered natural. It was a kill or be killed universe sometimes. Dying by Wraith was normal in Pegasus.

Jehan grimaced. They were going to change that. They were going to fix the fuck-ups arrogant Alterans like Helia had left behind.
"You gotta admire how far being a bastard gets him," O'Neill said as the Secret Service gave way and Gibbs stormed in.

"Bother," Hetty said.

"He isn't cleared for what he wants to know," O'Neill told her quietly.

Hammond leaned closer. "Do I take it this is the former sergeant Gibbs you served with during your ops days?"

"We didn't part on friendly terms," O'Neill said bleakly.

Hetty hrmphed, a sounded that was quietly filled with agreement, frustration, disgust, and regret. The kind of sound you only made with someone you'd worked beside under fire. Mer made noises like that. For a long time, Jehan and Vala were the only ones who understood them.

He checked the crowd for Vala. She'd spotted Gibbs as well and parted from her besotted major.

Gibbs hadn't spotted them yet. Presumably he was here for Hetty, and his expression was thunderous as he quartered the room for his target. Hollis appeared to be deliberately distracting and slowing him down. He had that Agent Bishop trailing in his wake.

Vala was moving faster than Jehan thought Gibbs rated. Her expression was set.

O'Neill had spotted her too. "Trouble?" he murmured.

"Hopefully, some overpaid under-brained dimwit attached to the president groped her," Mer answered, proving he'd been paying attention too.

They hadn't heard anyone screaming about a broken wrist or a punched dick, so Jehan dismissed that possibility. Handsy assholes didn't make Vala look alarmed anyway, just gleeful and mean.

Vala had been waylaid by Strom, Landry and LaPierre. She was radiating impatience, something she usually concealed, and scanning the room. Jehan narrowed his eyes.

"Time to leave," Vala announced as soon as she was close enough to be heard.

"What's wrong?" Jehan asked, while Mer tucked his hand into a pocket where Jehan knew he has an emergency 'come and get us' transmitter disguised as an EpiPen.

Vala glared at O'Neill. "Goa'uld."

"Here!" O'Neill almost squeaked. To his credit, he didn't deny the possibility.

"Yes. I kept feeling it while I was dancing, but it's moving, keeping a distance."

Hammond and O'Neill stiffened, Hetty shifted her hands in a way that made Jehan suspect she had a weapon of some kind too. Teyla began looking around the room for anyone that wasn't quite a fit. Goa'uld weren't good at not giving themselves away.

"The Goa'uld knows you could sense it. Probably why I haven't either. It's avoiding us." Mer said. Vala had better 'range' to her sensitivity than anyone else.

Jehan checked he could pull the stunner from its hiding place quickly. If the Goa'uld knew Mer had been Tok'ra, it would stay out of range of him too, but they'd made that easy by sticking to their quiet corner and not mingling.
"Should we get the President out?" Hammond asked.

"Could you tell who it is?" Mer asked.

"More than one?" Jehan added. He'd been able to feel Ba'al and his Jaffa. Ba'al was stronger; he thought it was a factor of age, the System Lord was old and strong. The prim'ta in the Jaffa's belly pouches were immature. Even so, several them would register. He'd never be as sensitive as Mer and Vala, but it was enough. If there were many Jaffa or more than one Goa'uld in the crowd, he figured he'd feel them. If it was Ba'al, he was sure he would know.

It had to be just one Goa'uld. Unless he was lying to himself and he just wanted it to be that simple.

"I haven't noticed anything," Mer said.  

"You've been hiding over here most of the evening," Vala replied. "I think it must be someone who just arrived."

"Good, even if we don't catch him, we'll be able to rule out most of the guests," O'Neill said. "We can check the logs."

"You're planning on letting it get away?" Mer exclaimed.

"Sure, it's not like protecting my planet from the snakes is my job or anything," O'Neill drawled. "George? Can you stick here? I need to round up Danny."

"Certainly, Jack, but I believe Dr. Jackson is on his way," Hammond agreed. He nodded to where Jackson and another man were. Jackson was talking enthusiastically, gesturing with his hands in their direction, while the other man looked on. A disdainful expression flashed across his face and disappeared as Jackson faced him.

"Him," Vala said, "the one with Daniel."

Jehan tried to stretch the sense of naquadah that Beckett had given him. He felt something. A buzz under his skin, a vibration at the base of his skull that could become nauseating if it went on.

Goa'uld.

"That's Barrett," O'Neill said. He stared at the tuxedoed man. "Damn it. The people assigned to make sure we aren't compromised are compromised."

"Ain't that always the way," Hetty commented.

Who will watch the watchers? Big fleas have lesser fleas. Jehan had always disliked the recursive implication. And so, on ad infinitum.

There wasn't much point to pretending they weren't all looking at him, Jehan thought. O'Neill waved at Jackson, gesturing for him to join them.

Hammond glanced at the rest of them. "I'm retired. He won't consider me as much a threat as someone who might recognize him. I'll draw him to one of the other rooms."

"You don't have any way to protect yourself," O'Neill objected.

The Marine band had begun once more, and couples swirled across the dance floor. The noise and movement were a distraction but cover as well; some of them could move through the crowd in the confusion.
Jehan stepped closer to Hammond and slipped his stunner to him. "It's non-lethal," he murmured to the retired general. "Point and shoot, no ATA." Grodin and Miko had designed and fabricated them based on Wraith weaponry. "If you can get him alone or even where no one will see, drop him."

"Will it work on him?" Hammond asked.

That was a question Jehan couldn't answer. They hadn't had an opportunity to try the Wraith stunners on Goa'uld. It should. "He might recover faster. You can hit him twice. It might not punch through a shield." Blasters hadn't.

"Not like a zat then?"

"No."

"Thank you," Hammond said. He turned to O'Neill and Hollis. "I'll tell him you confided something alarming to me."

"He might want more than that."

"I'll tell him you're planning to turn over the formula for the symbiote poison to Captain Mal Doran's people."

"Ouch."

"Wish to hell we had some right now," O'Neill confirmed.

"Seriously, could we get that?" Mer asked. "Why hasn't it been part of the negotiations? It's not like it's harmful to any of your people."

Hammond gave them all a nod and headed for Jackson and Barrett.

Forget a cyanide cap, Jehan thought, a false tooth with symbiote poison would be a damn good idea for all the SGC's gate teams. Crunch down and breath out if they were taken captive by Jaffa or in the same room as a Goa'uld. He'd sacrifice a real tooth for one of those.

It would have made kissing Ba'al much more bearable if the Goa'uld pushing its tongue into his mouth would have killed it. He pushed down the intrusive memory of the night in Ba'al's bed. There was a different Goa'uld to deal with now. He couldn't afford to be weak.

The group split into teams without discussion: Vala, O'Neill and Hetty, Teyla with Mer and him. They quartered through the room, homing in on the three men. Hammond had ushered Barrett, followed by Jackson, who was protesting or lecturing, toward the doors that would take them out onto the East Colonnade.

He glimpsed Hetty and O'Neill getting waylaid by a woman he thought was the Secretary of the Navy and another man. He couldn't see Teyla or Hollis and Gibbs. Vala was yanking on O'Neill's arm. Whatever she said to the SecNav and companion had them stepping back, and Vala swept away with Hetty and O'Neill in tow.

The weird irritation of the Goa'uld presence grew stronger. Barrett's eyes flared white as the Goa'uld inside him slipped its control. The reverb of its voice had several people looking its way as it declared, "They would not dare — " But Hammond had moved his bulk between Barrett and the crowd and the Goa'uld fell silent staring down at something between them.

Jehan and Mer arrived and flanked Hammond, providing more cover. He had the stunner aimed at
Mer held the 'come and get us' transmitter up and caught the Goa'uld's attention. "You want to bet they didn't? I press this button and the symbiote poison will fill this room. You'll be dead before you can get that door open."

Why the hell hadn't the SGC made symbiote poison grenades? Oh, because they didn't want to piss off the Tok'ra. They hadn't had it when Mer was taken by Jolinar, but he imagined it could have saved many gate teams.

He was going to convince Vala to snatch a sample. Lindsay or Miko or someone back on Atlantis could make them. They could modify smoke grenades. It was a just in case, he didn't expect the Goa'uld to show up in Pegasus, but there was always a chance Revenge would raid in the Stella VIA again. From what Radek said, Tempestas's crew certainly could have used the poison in the Praxyon attack.

But for now they had to work with what they had.

Hollis Mann arrived but without Gibbs. She must have shed him and his blond shadow in the crowd.

The little Alteran switchblade fit into his palm. If Barrett's Goa'uld had a shield, if it called Mer's bluff and the stunner he'd slipped Hammond didn't work on Goa'uld, he'd need it. It felt strange and wrong to be grateful for any of the training he'd received from Ba'al, but Jehan knew exactly how to slide the high-tech version of a low-tech weapon through a Goa'uld shield. He knew where to sink it in to kill a host and force the Goa'uld inside out. Or how to wound the host badly enough to immobilize it without forcing the symbiote out.

"Move out the door now," Hammond ordered. "I would prefer to act discreetly, but if you don't cooperate, I will shoot you. If that doesn't work, Dr. McKay will use the symbiote poison."

"There aren't any Tok'ra here," Jehan offered as an added reason to believe Mer would use the symbiote poison – if he'd really had it.

"Like I'd care," Mer replied. Of course, there was that. Did the Goa'uld know how little Mer cared for the Tok'ra?

"Now, Mr. Barrett," Hammond said.

Hammond was so soft spoken yet authoritative even the Goa'uld moved to obey. Jehan kept his expression still, but he wanted to grin at how seamlessly Hammond had picked up on Mer's bluff.

Barrett – the Goa'uld possessing him - kept his eyes on the stunner as he turned the doorhandle and pushed it open. They followed until they were almost outside, under cover of the colonnade with a wall on one side and the ornamental trees edging the Kennedy Garden on the right. Secret Service men were stationed at intervals and the group's exit got their attention. Nothing to be done about it.

Halfway out the last door Barrett made his move, slamming the door into Hammond's face.

Hammond used his bulk to good effect. He bulled through, banging the door open with one shoulder. Jehan rushed after him, Mer following him and Vala and the others behind them.

Barrett tried to run. O'Neill made it through the door and yelled at the Secret Service men. "Stop him!" Barrett skidded to a stop as four security men rushed down the veranda toward him.
One of the Secret Service men fired at Barrett. Jehan snarled, because the idiot's bullets could easily hit someone behind Barrett. They didn't. The two shots sparked and ricocheted off a Goa'uld shield.

"Damn it!" O'Neill yelled.

Barrett laughed as he reached into the breast pocket of his tuxedo jacket. Two stunners and the shimmering wave of power from Vala's *kara'kesh* fired at him. Iridescent waves of light chased themselves over the shield as it tried to contend with two different types of power.

Jehan thought *dagger* at the Alteran switchblade. It didn't have the best balance for throwing, but he had practiced with it endlessly during the trip from Pegasus to the Stella Via.

Barrett pulled a marble-sized device out. Goa'uld grenade. He could arm it with a flick of his thumb. It would take out the colonnade, a chunk of garden, part of the residence, and the entire East Room.

Jehan threw the knife. It sliced through the shield, too slow and low energy to activate it or perhaps immune thanks to its Alteran origins. It hit Barrett's wrist and sliced through flesh and bone, tendons, and blood vessels, with just inertia.

Barrett shrieked. His hand, nearly detached from his arm, hanging by a bit of skin and white shining tendon, lost the grenade. Blood splashed bright and hot onto the floor then stopped as the Goa'uld exerted control and shut down circulation to the arm and Barrett's pain receptors.

Or shunted the pain to the host. Mer said the old ones, like the System Lords, could do that.

Hammond, O'Neill and Vala kept firing at the Goa'uld. The shield was finally failing, oscillating bright flashes faster and faster. People were yelling commands, but Jehan was too focused to pay any attention.

The grenade rolled away from Barrett toward Jehan. He dropped to a knee with the intention of catching and disarming it. Hollis Mann darted forward first, though, scooped it up and pitched away across the garden into the trees beyond. Jehan's jaw dropped when the grenade blew, lifting one tree street straight up with a hellish *whump*. Dirt and leaves pattered down afterward, but there was no fire.

The Gould's shield failed with a pathetic fizzle and Barrett's body dropped like a garbage bag filled with mud. The Goa'uld was knocked out too: Barrett's half-severed hand began pumping out blood again.

One of the Secret Service men was yelling into his radio microphone that they needed back-up and medics. Hammond hid the stunner inside his uniform tunic, then dropped down to his knees. "Who has a belt?" he demanded.

Mer yanked his pants cuff up. "How about a sock garter?"

"That'll work," Hammond approved. He took the garter and turned it into a clever makeshift tourniquet. "If we get him care immediately, we might be able to save his hand. Jack –"

O'Neill had a phone out and was already giving orders. "Five minutes. We need to move him somewhere private."

"Sir, we have the White House physician on hand and an ambulance on its way," the nearest Secret Service agent said.
"My way's faster," O'Neill said. "And this guy can't be secured in a regular hospital anyway."

The Goa'uld would be on a one-way trip to Thor's Hammer, Jehan guessed, as soon as they had Barrett healthy enough to walk on his own.

More agents were herding people away from the windows and doors, saying that a guest had a medical emergency – not a lie – and the noise had been thunder and dry lightning. By the end of the night, the whole thing would be swept under the rug and spun into a need for more military appropriations and security for the President. Jehan remembered how it worked.

"I have to insist – "

"My authority trumps yours, kid."

They trailed after the stretcher as the unconscious Goa'uld was carried to a more secure and private area. Sirens were audible as they went back inside; fire and cops drawn to the noise. Car alarms were screaming blocks away.

O'Neill glanced back toward where the grenade had gone off. Hollis had pitched it well away from where it could damage anything. "Damn," he said appreciatively to her.

She rolled her shoulders. "Pitcher on my college baseball team."

"That was very well done," Teyla told her.

Hollis smiled slowly, not a big grin, but pleased and satisfied with herself. "Yeah, it was." Jehan liked her. He'd respected her in London, how she'd balanced figuring out what had happened and who had been behind the attack with handling the locals, maintaining operational security, and caring about the dead. But now he knew she'd really lay it all on the line and he admired that.

"Quit drooling," Mer muttered.

Jehan rolled his eyes. He wasn't drooling. He was… appreciating. Which Mer did when they encountered women who were brilliant as well as beautiful. Though anyone as smart as Mer was a lot rarer than women who were brave and clever and loyal. And if they came across someone who was as smart as Mer who was also all those things? Woman, man, or other, then Jehan would start worrying.

There was a protest outside the room, but the Secret Service gave way to the armed commandos from Homeworld Security that O'Neill had whistled up.

"Strip him to his skin and assume he still has something on him that you missed," Jehan advised as they dropped a transmitter on Barrett's chest and gathered around the stretcher.

The white incandescence of an Asgard beam snatched Barrett and the commandos.

O'Neill dusted his hands together in satisfaction. "Time to go put some brush fires out. I'm sure the commander in chief will want an explanation that makes him look like a hero, once he's changed his pants. Come on, Danny, you can dazzle him with some linguistic bullshit."

Jackson hadn't said much of anything, which was so different from usual Jehan peered at him worriedly. He decided Jackson was just shocked. They hadn't interacted much one-on-one since Revenge arrived; Jackson was tied up in hunting weapons to use against the Ori. Jackson knew Barrett, too, and knowing a Goa'uld was inside someone you'd known was always worse.
"Jack!" Hammond admonished.

"I have to follow his orders. I don't have to respect them," O'Neill said flatly and headed out. Jackson followed him like a second shadow. The Secret Service men flooded into the room and looked around for the prisoner in bafflement.

"He thinks he's clever," Vala commented as they were told forcefully to leave. The Secret Service agents would have loved to hold them, but they already knew the Pegasans had diplomatic immunity and, unless they tried an assassination, were untouchable tonight.

"A clever idiot," Mer commented.

Hollis had slipped out with them and chuckled. She matched her stride to Vala's. "Speaking of one of Jack's schemes… I have a favor to ask."

Vala looked interested. "Let's get a drink and talk."

"I don't like the looks of that," Mer commented as Vala, Hollis, and Teyla went off together.

That left Mer and him with Hammond and Hetty. His pulse still hammered hard enough he felt dizzy with too much oxygen and leftover adrenaline. His hands didn't tremble because his body handled adrenaline and its byproducts better than most, but he felt shaky inside.

They didn't even know what the Goa'uld had meant to do. Reveal itself? Assassination or a more terroristic mass killing with the grenade aimed at destroying the tentative alliance between Pegan and Tau'ri? How had it got Barrett and how long had it been occupying the NID agent? Was he the leak that resulted in the London attack? Was he connected to Ba'al and the Paris kidnapping?

The aftermath always left too many questions unanswered.

"God, let's go get a drink. At least the booze is good tonight," Mer declared. His voice squeaked a little, the way it did when he was stressed. Mer was like him; he never fell apart under pressure. It was afterward. But they weren't done yet. They needed to get back to the party and act like nothing had happened. Lucky they were all in clothes dark enough any blood splatter didn't show.

"I find myself in agreement," Hetty said.

Hammond offered the stunner back. Jehan preferred his blaster or even a zat most of the time. Atlantis had more of the stunners. "Keep it," he said. "I have a feeling you may need it more than we will soon."

It was impressive – or depressing – how effortlessly the reception went on. Most of the attendees were oblivious that anything had even happened or willing to ignore it in favor of enjoying themselves.

"The Masque of the Red Death," Hammond remarked as a set of dancers swirled before them. Jehan squinted, then got it: they were oblivious to Death right there with them, sure they were too important not to be safe.

"Surely not, George," Hetty said.

"I've grown cynical," Hammond replied, neither agreement or objection.

They reached the nearest of the open bars. Mer pushed forward past a tall man who was talking to an older, heavier man. He was already telling the bartender to pour four Scotchs as the man turned
"Sorry, gentlemen," Hetty said.

Both men ignored her and stared at Jehan. Hetty had no reason to know who they were, Hammond might never have seen pictures, and Mer certainly hadn't. Jehan didn't look much like them; he took after his mother.

Hammond proved he had seen pictures and remembered them, though. "Mr. Sheppard and Mr. Sheppard," he said to Jehan's father and brother.


Mer finally realized that another scene was in the offing. He turned with two tumblers in his hands, then narrowed his eyes as he handed them to Hetty and Jehan.

Jehan took his and tossed it back fast. This was nothing he'd wanted. The best way to avoid it would be to pretend he didn't even know them. Jehan abd-Ba'al wouldn't be cowed or impressed.

"John," his father said.

"You lied to us," Dave accused Hammond.

"Who are these people?" Jehan demanded. He put on his best version of Vala's accent.

Hammond didn't flinch, but he looked pained. "To the best of the US Air Force and the United States military establishment's knowledge, Major John Sheppard is dead." Truth out of context was as good as a lie.

"That's a crock of shit," Dave snapped. "John – God, you're alive –"

Jehan glanced over at Mer and said in Goa'uld, "I'm going to play at not being who they think I am. I may get pissy."

"I can see why," Mer replied in the same language. "They're idiots. It shouldn't be hard."

"Let me introduce you to Dr. Meredith McKay, Commander abd-Ba'al, and NCIS Operation Director Henrietta Lange," Hammond went on smoothly, like he hadn't heard Dave's words.

"It's Patrick Sheppard of Sheppard Energy, isn't it?" Hetty added, not giving anyone a chance to be anything but polite. "And this is your son David."

"Yes." Patrick shook her hand automatically. She worked for the government and was a woman and older, but there was a chance she might be useful or more powerful than she seemed. He wouldn't alienate a contact if he didn't have to.

Dave was less courteous or more shocked and didn't respond beyond a sullen nod.

"I'd say it's nice to meet you, but it's not," Mer stated when neither man acknowledged him.

Jehan hadn't spoken much about his past with anyone, but he'd shared some bits with Mer, when Mer was feeling down about never seeing his sister again. Mer knew the story of why John Sheppard had been stationed at Cheyenne Mountain the fateful day Apophis invaded and Earth, or at least the SGC, was dragged kicking and screaming onto the galactic stage. Mer had a good idea why Jehan didn't want to talk with his family on Earth, but even if he hadn't, he knew Mer would
have backed him anyway.

Patrick looked over Jehan, from the wide gold hoop in one earlobe, to his spiky hair, and the heavy rings on one hand, and his lip curled.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Of course, his father sounded like Jehan had snuck in and had no right to be present. No happy Son! You're alive! from Patrick Sheppard.

"Who is this?" Jehan asked Hammond. "Why is he talking to me?"

Mer took Jehan's empty tumbler and traded it for a full one. Jehan didn't chug this one.

Mer took Jehan's free hand and squeezed it. "I'm bored. Let's go." Jehan didn't know if Mer was showing off they were together or precluding any punching.

Jehan looked at his father, then Dave, then to Mer. Leaving sounded great. He lifted his hand joined with Mer's and kissed it. His father made an audible noise of disgust. "Fantastic idea."

"You have always been a disappointment, now I know why," his father remarked. He muttered, low enough no one more than a step away would hear. "A faggot."

"Enough," Hammond snapped, making it clear he had heard and did not approve. Anger reddened his face where facing off with a Goa'uld hadn't even ruffled his feathers. "You are embarrassing yourself and the United States. Commander abd-Ba'al is not your son."

"And no doubt grateful to not be," Hetty added with scorn.

Hammond caught the bartender's attention. "Whiskey," and asked, "Hetty?"

"Whiskey Sour," she said.

"Oh, sorry," Mer said and actually sounded sorry, "I should have asked."

Jehan's father ignored them both. Dave, as always, followed his lead, though he hadn't opened his mouth. He'd never supported John against Patrick. "You never did have any taste in who you associated with, but this is a new low," Patrick said. "Don't you have anything to say for yourself?"

Old anger jammed all the words in Jehan's throat, then he curled his lip in a sneer he'd learned from Ba'al. He had nothing to say to the man who had raised him and made sure he knew how disappointing a son he was. It was the sort of wound that closed over once you were an adult, but never really healed inside. He spoke to Hammond instead, "If this is an example of how an ally and a diplomat is treated in this country, after the other incidents we've 'overlooked', I will have to advise Ambassador Emmagan that the technology transfer should be cancelled."

If it came out that the IOA lost Tempestas because Patrick Sheppard insulted a member of the Pegasus delegation, Jehan's father would find himself quickly friendless in DC.

"Like I've been saying from the beginning," Mer added.

"I have nothing to say to them and nothing I want from them," Jehan told Mer. "Forget them."

Mer made an obscene Jaffa gesture. "Fuck them, then."

Vala swanned over, towing Hollis, who looked alarmed but determined, and Teyla, who was
wearing her 'this is such a bad idea, it's going to be fun' face. Mer caught it too and brightened.

"Who are we going to fuck and why?" Vala asked.

"Ladies," Hammond greeted them both with a small wince at Vala's language.

Vala walked her fingers up Jehan's arm, reminding him of the times they had fucked, and even the times it had been him and Mer with her. He leaned into it the way he'd been careful not to before, not wanting to give away he was more important than being a pilot.

"No one," he said. He handed his tumbler to Dave, who fumbled and took it because you didn't just drop expensive crystal, even if your mouth was hanging open in shock. "No one here could compare to you or Mer." They were his family, along with the crew and people back in Atlantis.

He met his father's gaze contemptuously, still channeling Ba'al's attitude, "I do not know who you believe I am. I do not care. Do not speak to me again."

Let his father choke on that.

From the almost plum color spreading in blotches over Patrick's face, it looked possible he would.

Vala smiled a Qetesh smile at Patrick. She was far more alert to emotional signals than she pretended, and she knew who had soured the mood in this group. She threaded her arm through Hammond's elbow and cuddled in close. "Come along, George. I think you and Hetty are just the people to give us a hand in a jail break."

"Sounds like fun," Mer said and tugged Jehan after her.

Dave caught Jehan's sleeve and jerked him back. "Don't think you can come back and play the prodigal son and take over. I'm the one whose done everything right. I'm the one who will triple SE's earnings by the end of the year. I don't care where you've been or why. Just stay away."

Jehan picked Dave's hand off his arm and bent back a finger until Dave was sweating and gritting his teeth against the pain.

"Do not touch me again," he said before releasing Dave's hand. "Unless you mean to cause a diplomatic incident."

"Moron," Mer added.

He walked away, still holding Mer's hand, and once they'd caught up with her, asked Vala, "Who are we breaking out of jail and why?"

Hetty

While she didn't know Hollis Mann beyond a file and this night, Hetty did know Jack. He didn't give up on his people. She could guess whose jailbreak the woman had suggested to Vala Mal Doran.

From what she'd seen of the technology they possessed, Mal Doran and her people could pull it off, too. If Hollis had found the black site where Jennifer Kim was being held by the NID, then the girl's luck might be about to change.
Hollis Mann had been US Army CID and retired as a colonel. She'd also been involved with Jethro, who despite his stubbornness held a fascination for women. The shared military and investigation career experience should have given Hollis and Jethro a firmer foundation than many, but Hollis had grown tired of his reticence and moved on with someone else. When that resulted in boredom and a divorce in Hawaii, Hollis had returned to investigating and been snatched up by O'Neill.

Hetty knew all this about the woman because she kept tabs on Gibbs and O'Neill. They were the last of her Cold War ducklings now that little Jenny was gone. She'd lost Sullivan and Renko and Hunter and poor Dom Vail since then, she wanted to be informed enough to help Gibbs or Jack if they ever needed her. They were both scarred and embittered by events even she couldn't save them from and they didn't make it easy, but they were still dedicated in their ways. She was proud of them both, that they'd been broken but rebuilt themselves and gone on.

She had been determined, since that terrible day in Poland, that she would never see her people forced to break themselves again. She'd failed, of course, but she didn't fail because she didn't try.

"You know, George," she said, "I feel like we might be better off with a little plausible deniability here. What we don't know… " Her words trailed off as she spotted a familiar and for the moment unwelcome face stalking through the crowd toward them. "Oh, bugger."

Hetty had finally located her.

Somehow Jethro had discovered Hetty was in DC and in his usual bullheaded way, he meant to confront her here rather than wait for morning or even asking her to come to the Navy Yard.

O'Neill had spotted him too and triangulated a course that reached Hetty's little group just ahead of Gibbs.

"You," Jethro snarled as soon as he was close enough. Hetty couldn't guess whether he meant her or the Pegasan contingent or Jack. He glared at Hammond, who was blameless, just for being in their company.

There was only one way Jethro could have found Hetty at a White House reception: Leon Vance. Leon had been present when Jack returned her calls with an invitation to attend as his plus one. And while Leon didn't know the specifics of Hetty's past with Jethro and Jack, he knew there was one, and that there was bad blood.

Someday, Leon would learn that throwing bloody chum in the water wasn't the best way to make friends and influence people. Not even if you were one of the sharks.

Hetty would have been less sanguine if Dr. McKay and Captain Mal Doran and Commander abd-Ba'al hadn't obliquely assured her Mr. Callen, Mr. Hanna, Ms. Blye and Mr. Deeks weren't safe and well and soon to be returned.

"Agent, ah, Grubbs, wasn't it?" Dr. McKay said. "I thought you were still in London."

A muscle in Jethro's jaw twitched.

"It's not Grubbs," Commander abd-Ba'al drawled. He was still stiff with anger from the unfortunate confrontation with the Sheppards, per et fils. Too angry for him to be anyone but who they'd thought he was. "It's Gimps."

"It's Gibbs," Jethro gritted out.

"Right, Leroy."
Hetty carefully pursed her lips. It wouldn't do to laugh.

"Like Bad, Bad Leroy Brown?" Dr. McKay asked Commander abd-Ba'al, ignoring Gibbs.

Commander abd-Ba'al snapped his fingers. "That is such a good song."

"You'll have to excuse Ms. Lange," Gibbs told them with an icy glare. "NCIS business."

"Of course," Hetty said. "It must be urgent. Go ahead. Unless you consider me a suspect and want me in an interrogation room."

If Jethro kept grinding his teeth like that he wouldn't have any left soon.

"Watch it, Jethro," O'Neill said.

"Fine," Jethro gave in with no grace.

The lovely Miss Emmagan took pity though and drew off Captain Mal Doran, CommanderabdBa'al, Dr. McKay and Ms. Mann. Jack frowned after them, perplexed. "What's that all about?"

"I believe Ms. Mann is negotiating with the 'overseas' contingent for their help retrieving that item you lost now that she's located it," Hetty told him.

Jack's eyebrows went up and then he laughed. "I didn't hear that."

Jethro snorted, a sound of contempt and disbelief.

Unruffled, Hetty told him to ask his questions. When he balked, she added, "You were the one who decided it was so urgent you had to crash this reception."

"What do you know about Callen and his team's disappearance then?" Jethro demanded. He was attempting to loom over Hetty, but she was immune. She suspected that while they were giving the appearance of granting Jethro and her privacy, the others were keeping an eye out. If Jethro had been the sort of man to get physical, Hetty could handle herself, but she knew Jack and Hammond would step in if they thought Jethro was threatening her, too.

Hetty let out a little snort, under her breath and ladylike. "Jethro – "

"That's Agent Gibbs."

"Jethro," Hetty stressed, "I have already provided everything I know in the matter, which is sadly, nothing. Assistant Director Mosely hadn't tasked their team to an active investigation and I hadn't asked them to perform anything off the books. I've been in Washington most of the month."

Gibbs' pale eyes scanned her. "Looks like you're back to fighting form."

"Thank you, but at my age, recovery does take longer."

"Heard you got yourself in the shit, and that it took Chigwedden, and Callen's teams to yank your ass out of it," Gibbs said.

"You heard, did you?" O'Neill asked in disbelief. "Nobody heard from you. It was most of a damn year."

Gibbs shot him a dirty look. "Didn't hear about you traipsing around Vietnam."
"You think Mosely has the pull to re-task a goddamn satellite? I made sure Callen's people got the intel they needed to get her back."

Jethro really had no idea the power Jack wielded, not just in Washington or the Air Force, but everywhere with starships at his command. Hetty sighed to herself. She had thought she'd seen all there was to see, but she did wish she could see one of those and perhaps see Earth from space.

She doubted Callen or his team were in a position to appreciate their lodgings.

"I don't believe any of our people thanked you for that, Jack," Hetty murmured.

"More backdoor black-op bullshit." Jethro practically spat the words. How he hated being out of the loop. "You and the 'Duchess' are neck deep in it."

"You used to swim in the same pool, as I remember," O'Neill fired back. "Your record isn't exactly lilywhite."

"If Callen and his people – "

"My people," Hetty corrected him.

"– if any agents are dead because of cleaning up your unauthorized mess," Jethro went on, "I will nail your skin to the wall. You're not worried enough," he accused her. "You know what's happened to your agents."

"Perhaps you should take that as reassuring rather than a provocation," Hetty replied.

"You think I won't put you in an interrogation room? Watch me."

"I think you know I have experience in withstanding interrogations," Hetty said placidly. "Recent practice."

"You're out of control, Gibbs," Jack snapped.

Ms. Mann strolled back to them. "Are you even interested in solving cases any more, or just persecuting whoever you've decided you don't like?" she asked.

"Stay out of this," Jethro snapped at her. "This is just another part of whatever dirty tricks O'Neill is up to, and you may be neck deep in that, but you don't have a clue what this one is like." He pointed at Hetty rudely. "You'll think you're her darling protégé only to find yourself bleeding out in the snow."

"Still pissed about Poland, Jethro?" Jack asked. "Hetty didn't lie. You knew better than to get involved and you did anyway."

"It didn't bother you a damn bit, did it?" Jethro growled.

"You wouldn't know, because you could never see past the end of your dick," Jack told him.

"I'm going to find whatever you have going on and destroy you," Jethro stated with venom.

"Did I cut too close to the bone?" Jack wasn't bothered by Jethro's very real enmity. Hetty knew he'd faced worse threats than Jethro could ever muster. He shook his head. He'd just faced it earlier in the evening. "Go back to bullying your agents and blaming them for the consequences of your decisions – "
"You sonovabitch – "

"Jack, stop." Hetty interrupted them both, but they weren't listening.

Jack leaned in and said quietly, "You're the reason Jenny's dead, Gibbs. She botched that Paris mission and lied about it, and you knew it and covered for her. You let her get away with it and she thought she was untouchable, right up until the past came back and killed her."

It looked like the life leached from Jethro's face, then came back fusion hot, his blue eyes glacial, as he replied, "At least my kid didn't die because I was too careless to lock up my service weapon."

"You just went too far, Agent Gibbs," General Hammond said. He'd laid a hand on Jack's arm to hold him if necessary, but Jack was frozen by Jethro's cruel blow. "I have the greatest respect for the US Marine Corps and I understand you were a member. They would be ashamed if they'd heard you just now."

Hetty closed her eyes. She didn't want to see Jack's face. Charlie's death was a tragedy that Jack lived with every day and for Jethro, who had been broken by the murders of his wife and daughter, to use it against him was unspeakable. When she judged Jack would have control again, she faced Jethro and spoke.

"That was spiteful, unprofessional, and unforgivable."


"I'm not finished – "

"You most definitely are," General Hammond declared. He released Jack and took Jethro's lapel in one fist. "The Secret Service has had a bad night. I think they'd be happy to throw you out or lock you up overnight if you make a scene, Agent Gibbs." He towed Jethro away.

"I am so sorry," Hetty told Jack quietly.

She'd gone to Jack after Charlie's death and offered him anything she could that would distract him from the pain. Nothing would ease it; she hadn't been arrogant enough to think so. He had refused, and she'd feared that Jack would follow his son into death after the divorce that followed, but instead he'd disappeared into the mysterious operations being run from Cheyenne Mountain. Even she had been unable to uncover what Deep Space Radar Telemetry had been a cover for until Jack came to her after Jenny's death.

Jack let out a gusty breath. "He never did fight fair. I shouldn't have made that dig about Jenny."

Hetty agreed, but she felt Jack was right. Jenny had been headstrong, but after Paris she'd lost her internal compass. Having lied and gotten away with it hadn't done her any good.

She sighed. Jenny was dead. The blame game did no one any good.

"Jack," she said quietly, "could you take me back to my hotel?" She was exhausted. "Or find someone to drive me? Even just call a taxi."

"If my date is ready to leave, then I am," Jack said gallantly. He looked gray and as tired as Hetty felt. "I never liked these things anyway. Let's go."

It wasn't quite that easy or straightforward, but Jack did get them both away. He walked her up to her suite and sat down in the chair by the window that showed Washington DC by night to its best
effect. He brought out the little gizmo he used to make sure no could listen in, turned it on and said, "Pretty sure I was supposed to die tonight."

"Probably," Hetty agreed dryly. "You and many others."

"The thing is, we won this skirmish, but we lost the battle."

"Not the war?"

"Not the war, not until we're all dead or brain-dead Ori worshippers, but this was a hit. Mal Doran and Emmagan have no ties to Earth and the ones that do have been so thoroughly alienated they might enjoy seeing us get curb-stomped."

He scrubbed his hands over his hair. It was thoroughly gray now, just as Jethro's had gone silver. Hetty had been dyeing her own hair for so many decades as part of her covers, she'd never noticed when it went white except to adjust the formula.

She thought of little Jenny's red locks and blinked back tears. Thought of Poland and blood on the snow. None of them had known then that the spy games they were playing to deadly ends were like unto bighorn sheep bashing into each other while a hunter targeted them. The universe was no bigger than it had been when she was a girl, but the door was open now, they could do more than peer out the windows.

They could go out, but threats they'd never known or forgotten could also find their way in.
Chapter 17

Jeannie Miller

Madison was at school, Kaleb was at work, and Jeannie had just finished the basic clean up and housekeeping she did every morning. She had a load of laundry in the washer and another in the dryer. The floor was vacuumed, the windows could wait another week if she closed the curtains, and she was free until time to pick up Madison after lunch.

She plopped into her favorite chair with a tablet, a big pad of paper with Maddy's colored markers, and a cup of tea. She had every intention of doing some theoretical math. Since Maddy had started school she'd been getting back into it. She thought someday she might come up with something that would have impressed Meredith.

The knock at the front door was not welcome.

She'd developed a dislike for unexpected visitors after an US Air Force captain had arrived on her steps with news that her brother was dead. No matter how many questions she had asked, Jeannie had never received a satisfactory explanation of what had happened to him.

He'd left her everything he had, which turned out to be some very decent investments, a couple of patents, royalties on a game he’d designed and programmed in college, and a fat cat. Maddy had immediately fallen in love with the cat when Jeannie went to clean out Meredith's apartment in Colorado Springs and Mr. Fuzzybuns (renamed by Maddy) had come home with them.

Mr. Fuzzybuns had passed away a year ago, and sadly the cat had been more of presence in Maddy's life than her uncle had ever been. Maddy still missed the furry beast. Jeannie didn’t miss cleaning the litter box.

In any case, the experience had left her with a flinch reflex toward loud knocking.

She headed to the foyer anyway. Vancouver wasn’t a hive of criminal activity and the house was in a quiet suburb, but it never hurt to be cautious so she checked through the peephole with the door still locked.

There were two men on her front porch. One dark haired, but she paid little attention to him, because the impatient, annoyed, and so painfully familiar man in front of him was her brother.

Jeannie turned the lock and yanked the door open. "You sonovabitch!" she yelled and went to punch Meredith in the nose. "You let me think you were dead!"

She was more than a little startled when Meredith caught her fist on one palm and stopped her punch cold. He had never had fast reflexes. Jeannie had always been the more physical sibling – as well as more popular – and she'd been punching him since childhood.

Meredith had never hit back, and had never stopped her before either.

"I was left for dead, thanks," he snapped at her, still holding her fist. The dark-haired guy standing behind him gave Jeannie a smile that made her shiver. A shark smile. He didn't seem to like her at all. " I was imprisoned by so-called allies for years, until they got taken by the enemy. Then I was tortured and left for dead. Sorry I didn't get in touch until now. Being thought dead was all completely my idea; I planned the whole thing just to screw with you."
Jeannie pulled her hand back and covered her mouth. Tortured? Meredith? He wasn't..he wasn't strong like that. He was smart, but he wasn't brave or tough; he used his brain and prided himself on not needing to be physical. Brains over brawn, he'd boasted more than once through their childhood.

"Oh my God."

"If you aren't going to invite me in, tell me what happened to my cat and you can go back to thinking I'm dead," Meredith went on. "You won't hear from me again. We leave in a week and won't be coming back."

Jeannie stumbled back. "No! No, get in here, you're not leaving without meeting Madison and Kaleb, and, Mer," his name became a wail as it finally sank in that he was here and he was alive, "I thought you were dead!" She tackled him into a hug, only refraining from wrapping all four limbs around him the way she'd done as a child.

She remembered suddenly that even as a boy, he'd let her do that, and would carry her around. Meredith patted her back and cleared his throat. "Let's get this inside. I'm sorry no one told you I wasn't dead – they didn't know for years."

Jeannie made herself let go and stepped aside so Meredith and his companion could step inside.

"Oh," Mer said, abruptly remembering they weren't alone. "This is Jehan Sheppard." He reached back and took Sheppard's hand in his. They laced their fingers together automatically.

Jeannie blinked. "Are you - ?"

"Yes," Meredith stated. He glanced at Sheppard, who ducked his head, abruptly shy and skittish instead of silently threatening. The warmth in Meredith's look shocked Jeannie. She hadn't thought her brother could be that affectionate.

"Yes," confirmed Sheppard and his eyes were keen again, gaze meeting Jeannie's without apology.

"For how long?"

"Years," Meredith dismissed with a wave of his hand. "Since he and Vala picked me up in a port bar. They needed an engineer and I needed to get the hell out of there before the Tok – before the people that had held me caught up." He made a face. "Allies, my left foot. A snake's a snake's a snake no matter what they say they are."

Jeannie started to ask who Vala was and why Meredith hadn't come home before, but he went on, "So what happened to Oscar?"

"Oscar?"

“My cat? I had an agreement with my neighbor to come in and feed him, but what happened when my apartment was closed up?"

"Oh," Jeannie gasped in relief. "Your cat. I didn't know his name. I brought him home with me. Maddy adored him. She renamed him Mr. Fuzzybuns. He passed away about a year ago."

Meredith's face twisted through a series of emotions: relief, outrage, sorrow, and acceptance. "Well," he said, clearing his throat, "I knew he wasn't a youngster and I've been gone...a while. Thank you. I worried about him."
Jeannie blinked back sudden tears. She would have taken the cat to a shelter and forgotten about him if it hadn't been for Maddy. She hated thinking what Meredith’s face would have looked like if she’d had to tell him that.

"We can get a cat to take home with us," Sheppard said quietly. "We can get a whole litter of kittens. Or some older ones. Both. The ship needs a cat." He still had hold of Meredith's hand. "Some of the others are getting dogs, and that botanist is practically taking an entire nursery back."

"Botany," Meredith repeated in sheer scorn.

"I know, but it'll mean fried potatoes eventually," Sheppard teased.

"Fine, whatever. We'll go to a kill shelter."

"Why would you go to a kill shelter and not a no-kill one?" Jeannie demanded.

"To adopt ones that would be killed otherwise," Meredith said.

She didn't know this Meredith. She'd never really known her own brother, Jeannie thought, only the image of him she'd had since childhood. It was disconcerting. She didn't like having to rethink her beliefs.

She pulled herself together and urged Meredith and Sheppard into the living room. She then asked if they wanted something to drink or eat, and mentioned she'd need to pick up Madison in a couple of hours. They demurred but sat down to visit. When they were all sitting, Jeannie finally asked, "What happened to you?"

Meredith and Sheppard exchanged a long look, the sort couples used to communicate when they didn't need words to understand each other. They were deciding what to tell her. She felt a brief spurt of anger at being shut out and the decision taken out of her hands.

"It's all classified," Meredith said at last.

"Oh, why even show up if - "

"But we don't give a damn about classified," Mer went on. "Screw the government. All of them. They're all lying to you."

Jeannie snapped her mouth shut and sat back. "Will you get in trouble for telling me?"

"No," Sheppard said. "They can't touch us without courting more trouble than they want to handle. The important question is will you get in trouble for knowing."

"Do you know what we mean?" Mer asked.

"Yes," Jeannie said. She understood the implications. She wasn't naïve enough to think being Canadian would protect her from the wrath of the US Government, or even that her government was pure as snow with all good intentions.

"All right," Meredith agreed with an odd smile. "I meant to tell you anyway, you know. Can't offer you a chance to immigrate if you don't know the whole story."

*Immigrate?*

"Why on Earth would I want to move to the States?"
Sheppard and Meredith burst into laughter.

"Jeannie, it would be a lot farther than the States!"

Hours later, Jeannie sat in the driver's seat of her car, looking blankly through the windshield at the school while she waited for the doors to open and Maddy to tumble out. Meredith and his friend had left, but they had promised to come for dinner the next night. That would give Jeannie time enough to talk to Kaleb and brace him for, well, everything.

She almost didn't believe Meredith's story. Almost. Aliens, Lorentzian wormholes, more aliens, space ships, other galaxies, and even more aliens. She wasn't sure she had it all straight. There were the Ancients, who were really the Alterans, who were the Gatebuilders, and some people on Earth had genes inherited from them, because they looked human. And apparently were enough so that they could interbreed. Jeannie wasn't sure if they counted as aliens. But there were Asgard, who weren't Norse gods, but more like the little green men of alien conspiracy theories. They're gray, not green, she remembered Meredith correcting her. There were the snake things that enslaved people and had possessed Meredith, and there were Wraith… who were half-insect vampire things.

"My God," she murmured to herself.

She would have accused Meredith of lying if he hadn't demonstrated the math for the wormholes. She'd been reacquainting herself with current mathematical theory over the last few months. She knew enough to see that what Meredith was talking about was beyond anything anyone was publishing and was enough of a mathematician herself to understand it once it was in writing.

Sheppard had also demonstrated some of the alien technology that took the special genes.

Jeannie was still in shock.

Spaceships.

Faster than light travel.

"Oh my God."

She had to talk to Kaleb tonight. To let him know Meredith had showed up alive and to feel out if he'd be willing – would want – to leave Vancouver. To leave Earth. Though how she could convince him about the whole 'city-ship in another galaxy' part confounded her. No, it just wouldn't work. They'd have dinner with Meredith and his boyfriend tomorrow night and say their good-byes. They had their lives here and Meredith had his out there. It just wouldn't be safe with a child to worry about.

'Sure, it's dangerous, but people have kids in Pegasus too. Look, Jeannie, Earth might be more comfortable right now, but the Ori are coming, and no one has a clue how to stop them.' Meredith and his pirate friends hadn't come to Earth to visit or come home or even to rescue family. They had come to grab everything they could before it was gone.

No, Meredith had to be exaggerating. Earth was the safe choice. She was a mother and wife. She couldn't drag her family off to play at being space pirates.

She jolted when Madison tapped her car window. She'd utterly zoned out and missed the school letting out. Jeannie popped the locks and got out. Maddy still needed to be in a car seat in the back and that meant buckling her wiggly, happy to be free from school daughter in. Maddy might insist
she could do it, but Jeannie wouldn't take a chance.

"Hey," she said after hugging Maddy, "guess what?"

"What?" Maddy demanded immediately.

Jeannie paused and re-evaluated if she wanted to tell Maddy about Meredith. He was going back to another galaxy in a week. As far as Maddy knew, her uncle that she'd never met was dead. Would it be cruel to introduce her just to have him disappear again? Because no matter what Meredith said, she wasn't uprooting her family and following him to some alien world. She wasn't *insane*.

"I feel like ice cream," Jeannie substituted.

"Ohhh," Maddy whispered, eye wide with hope and delight.

"Do you feel like ice cream?"

"Yes!"
Chapter 18

Gibbs

Gibbs stalked through the OSP headquarters. It was lovely inside compared to the orange walls at the Navy Yard headquarters. It was probably Hetty's doing. Except Mosely's office, which was all Mosely. He hated it, all of it.

He'd interviewed Mosely again hoping for something useful, but she had nothing to offer him. Callen had ignored protocol and gone out of bounds and this time dragged his team with him.

Hetty was still in DC. There was a vibe in the offices, though. With Hetty's favorite team missing and her also gone again, the LA office felt rudderless. Even with Mosely there, who was clever and competent, everyone looked worried.

The rumors were thick. Hetty was on her way out. Vance was gunning for her. She'd danced along the line once too often, crossed it, and not made it back in time for deniability with the Vietnam fiasco.

The people still left who were loyal to her first, and they were thinner on the ground than Gibbs would have expected, looked grim.

He was being stonewalled everywhere, though. They didn't like him, they didn't trust him, and they didn't want him here. They didn't know shit, either.

Except for Jones and Beale. They might know something.

Beale he could break in half an hour, easy, but Jesus, it would be like stomping a puppy. Beale was even softer than McGee used to be.

Jones, though… Jones might know something, but she was like Hetty in training; tiny, determined, and some day, terrifying. (Gibbs might hate her these days, but he couldn't deny that Hetty Lange had always been larger than life and fiercely, frighteningly competent.) He suspected he could put Jones in an interrogation room and he wouldn't get a damned thing. She might not be formally trained in resisting, but she was scary smart and between Hetty's mentorship and having watched many interrogations herself, Jones would see through anything Gibbs threw at her.

No, he couldn't just question her. Straightforward was out.

Gibbs hated the twists and turns. He'd gotten out of Hetty's game in part because of just that, the lies tied in knots, the betrayal behind every promise. He was a sniper. His whole being was about the perfect straight line between point a and point b, between the trigger and the target.

Hetty knew what was going on. He was sure of it. She'd been too fucking amused by him in DC – a twist of shame knotted Gibbs' gut at the memory - until he'd shoved his foot in his mouth and taunted O'Neill about his son.

"Bishop," he snapped, when he reached his own team. They weren't doing anything. It was unfair to be angry with them when he couldn't make any progress either, but he was.

"Yes?"
"Talk to Jones again. She'd holding something back. I want it." Bishop had the softest touch of any of his team now. She made people want to confide in her. Maybe she could tease something out of Miss Jones.

He wanted to know if Callen had dropped his team in the middle of O'Neill's current shitstorm. He'd looked up General George Hammond, USAF, Ret. Hammond had been O'Neill's commanding officer at Cheyenne Mountain. You didn't end up with a chest full of medals, classified citations up the ying-yang, and invitations to exclusive 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue receptions for guarding dust bunnies in NORAD's basement.

If Hetty was read in, then it was likely that the same mess that had killed Marines in London and Marine and Air Force officers in Pax River had reached out and snatched Callen and his team.

He didn't even consider calling Hollis. She knew he'd been ordered to stay away from those cases. It was like a pebble in his shorts grinding into his damned balls, that she knew what he didn't. Knew whatever covert business McKay, Doran and Shepherd were up to.

Gibbs narrowed his eyes.

He had no clue where those three were now. Doran and Shepherd had no affiliations in their files, no strings connecting them to anyone else.

But McKay did.

McKay was Canadian, and he had family. Gibbs didn't have the file any longer, but he didn't need it. He remembered enough. Jean McKay Miller, sister, lived in Vancouver BC.

"McGee," he said.

"Yes, boss!"

He had no bodies, so he had no scene, which meant no forensics and no reason to check in with Palmer or Abby back in DC. He might treat them and Ducky like they were his personal aides, but in fact they worked on cases for all NCIS's teams.

He turned what he knew around in his head, which was more a list of what he didn't know. What would fill the empty spaces in this puzzle?

"Where were the team's personal vehicles?"

Torres scabbled through a file and read off: "Hanna's vehicle was parked at the marina where he's been living. According to everyone, Callen usually picked him up in the morning. Callen's car was in the office parking lot. CCTV footage from the lot shows him arriving that morning with Hanna. The car's still in the lot. It's been searched."

They'd search it again, just like they had Callen's house, Blye's condo and Deeks' apartment. Gibbs himself had gone over Hanna's half-restored fishing boat from stem to stern.

"Okay," Torres went on, "Deeks has a motorcycle and a 1976 Suburban registered in his name… Looks like the bike's in storage, non-operational, and the Suburban was parked in the lot at his apartment; nothing but surfboards in it. And Ms. Blye has a Toyota Forerunner that's in the office lot with Callen's car."

Right. Gibbs frowned. OSP ran undercover ops and provided vehicles, clothes, even locations to support their agents' legends. Headquarters expected agents to use public transport or their own
vehicles most of the time, though there was a small agency fleet for specific needs like the lab van. In LA, though, public transport was minimal to non-existent. Everything was an endless Celtic knot of five-lane highways. The OSP agents drove OSP vehicles for work. Gibbs considered LA the equivalent of a vehicular roach motel: you could get on freeway, but you could never get off.

"Find out which OSP cars they used, where they are now and where they were found." The damned things must be chipped. McGee could trace wherever they'd been driven.

"On it," McGee said. His fingers were already tapping away at his laptop. A frown aged his face. So did the stupid Vandyke he'd been sporting since Uruguay.

"I'm going out for coffee," Gibbs announced. He didn't need the caffeine, but he knew his people worked faster without him glowering over their shoulders. If you had good people, the smart thing to do was step back and let them do what they did best.

He came back in time to see Bishop and Miss Jones leaving a car to go back inside the offices.

"Bishop," he called.

She parted from Jones, who continued inside, and waited for Gibbs.

"I went with her to feed and walk Deeks' dog," Bishop explained.

"And?"

"And blerrgh," Bishop said. "I didn't get anything new. They weren't working any cases. They were called off the only thing they were checking out weeks ago."

The late afternoon light caught in her hair and her dark eyes, warming both. She was young enough to be his daughter. But she didn't need family or a father figure for protection; she had all she needed. Gibbs had been tempted to punch her cheating asshole ex-husband for her though, because he was there and her brothers weren't - but Bishop wouldn't have appreciated it. She'd fought her own battles. It was why he liked her: she looked delicate, but there was steel under the pretty. More than she'd known herself.

Not like Ziva. Ziva, who was hard and harsh, saw most things in black and white, and was grievously brittle underneath. She’d had no one who really cared about her, only what she could accomplish.

"What inquiry were they called off?" Gibbs asked.

"Some private outfit that hired a security company run by one of Callen's contacts, to do deep background checks on scientists. It didn't turn out to be anything. Nell thinks it was a proprietary company; the primaries seemed to be using false names but when Hetty showed some military guy pictures of them, they were told to leave them alone."

Gibbs sipped his coffee. It was still hot. It was damned hard for anything to cool off in the LA heat. He was sweating under his sport blazer and envious of the blouse thing Bishop got away with wearing, although even she had a mist of sweat at her hairline. DC got muggy and sticky as hell, but not this early in the year. People didn't walk around in flip-flops, tank tops and shorts in DC in freaking February.

"What was the name of the company?"

"Quindozum Enterprises."
It wasn't familiar.

He wanted to know more.

McGee had come up with a map of where the vehicles had been the night Callen's team disappeared.

"Warehouse district, way out in the boonies," Torres commented. They were borrowing OSP's ops room. Beale and Janes hovered at the fringes of what was normally their territory.

"Any reason for them to be out there that night?" Gibbs asked although he knew there hadn't been one.

"None," Mosely announced from the doorway. She held her frustration in better than Gibbs did, but he saw it in the twist of her mouth, heard it in the edge in her voice. A top team going MIA on her watch wouldn't look good on her record. He'd give her credit that she did care about the team more than her ambitions, though. She just kept it professional was all.

He sloshed his coffee in its half empty, covered cup.

"Walking distance of where they were parked?" he questioned. "Anything pop?"

McGee began working but Beale was already squinting at the satellite map displayed on one screen.

"Quindozum," Beale said.

Gibbs saw Jones jam her elbow into Beale's ribs, but it was too late. Gibbs swung his attention back to McGee. "Anything connected to Quindozum Enterprises, McGee," he directed.

A minute later another screen displayed and highlighted a group of warehouses. There was no sign on the heavy gate leading into the compound, just the address. There was a security booth at the gate, but it was empty. The bar across the entry was up and the gate stood open. No vehicles were in sight.

"Is this live?" Gibbs asked.

"CCTV from an industrial park across the road," McGee confirmed.

"It's empty," Bishop said.

"Looks like it's been cleaned out," Mosely commented.

Gibbs agreed and found the timing damning.

"I want everything on Quindozum. I want to talk to Callen's contact, the one that alerted him to the company. I want – "

"Boss, there's some surveillance pics of the company's principals. You want those up?" McGee interrupted.

"Find them. I want answers."

"Ouch!" Beale squeaked. He was giving Jones a wounded look, but she looked like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. Gibbs glared. Whatever she knew, Jones wouldn't say.
He felt like they were finally making some progress, but an hour later frustration set in again. Everything Quindozum Enterprises owned appeared to have been emptied out, closed up, and shut down in the last week. Warehouses, offices, server farm, hotel rooms - nothing of them was left anywhere. Even their website had disappeared and nothing McGee did could unearth any cyber history.

McGee lifted his hands away from his keyboard in surrender. "I've got nothing, boss. Someone really, really, **amazingly** good wrote a worm and set it loose in the internet. It went through and rewrote anything anywhere that was connected to erase all mention of Quindozum. There's no way to trace them."

"What about a paper trail?" Mosely asked.

"Physical paper?" McGee gaped at her. If it wasn't on a computer, it seldom occurred to McGee.

"Yes, McGee," Gibbs snapped at him. "Paper. Like the reports I keep telling you to **print out** for filing purposes."

Beale had been typing at another terminal. The screen in front of him showed the form for a surveillance report. It was blank. He looked horrified.

"They got into our servers. The reports have been wiped."

"Find out how and make sure it never happens again," Mosely rapped out. She looked as upset as Beale. OSP's electronic security should have been on par with the best the US government had. If they'd been hacked, anything could have been. "Find out everything that's been altered."

"That's like trying to remember what you don't remember," Beale muttered. But he was already typing again.

Mosely looked at Gibbs. "Find them. I'll handle the security breach." She took a deep breath. They'd only recently winkled out a damned mole. Now this would call everyone into question again. Gibbs sympathized with the clusterfuck of screaming political appointees Mosely would have to handle. The damned mess Michelle Lee had made of his office was still a sore point for him.

Spies. One thing Hetty was right about. **God hates a spy.**

"Are there paper files?" McGee asked Jones. "Those should have survived the system intrusion."

Jones stiffened but nodded. "There were also some pictures developed from film."

"Get them. Bishop, go with her." He didn't trust Jones. She was Hetty's creature, protégé, proxy. The eyes in the back of her head or at least in this office. Trusted to act or refrain all on her own without input from Hetty.

Jones and Bishop came back with an accordion folder filled with surveillance pictures. Gibbs stared at the people in them. They didn't look like terrorists or spies.

But Hetty didn't look dangerous. Neither did Ziva.

Appearances were sometimes deceiving. These four people could be much more than they appeared to be. Little Japanese woman, lanky Caucasian woman, handsome man in his thirties with a Mediterranean complexion, slight, fair-haired man who reminded Gibbs a little of Ducky. They could be from anywhere in the world; ethnic profiling was fallacious in a world after generations of
global immigration.

The faces in the pictures told Gibbs nothing. Neither did the names. Generic, bland names meant to blend into the mundane, to be quickly and easily forgotten.

"Nell, give me one of those," Beale said. "I want to scan it in and see if the worm is still active. If it is, maybe I can trace it. If not, I'm going to use the images to run facial recognition over the last week."

Jones handed Beale one of the photos that had decent full-face shots of the two men and two women.

Gibbs resorted to the office coffee. He didn't really want to drink it, but going and getting a mug of it gave him something to do while he waited.

He was pouring when Torres skidded to a stop at the top of the second-floor balcony. "Gibbs, you need to get up here and see this," Torres called. "Right now."

He abandoned the coffee and took the steps two at a time.

"It's from the foyer of the Mena House Oberoi in Cairo," Beale said. "The worm missed it because it hadn't been uploaded until a couple days ago."

The blurry screenshots from a black-and-white surveillance camera contained three of the four Quindozum operators. Two of them were clear enough that the facial recognition program had flagged them. Gibbs could tell the one half turned away was the Japanese woman. Height, build, stance; it was her.

Not exciting enough to have Torres' voice pitching up.

Then Gibbs recognized four faces from London in the background. Magan, Doran, Shepherrd, and McKay.

"Sonovabitch," he breathed out.

"Coincidence?" McGee offered as devil's advocate.

"You know I don't believe in coincidence." Gibbs curled his hands into fists. He'd been played, jerked around, yanked off case after case, and he was furious. The intrusion and manipulation into NCIS and other networks had moved this far beyond the death of a few Marines and into a threat to national security.

"Find them," he said. "Any of them. When you do, we're going to get them."

And he would get his answers, no matter what Jack O'Neill or Hetty Lange did to stop him. The answer to a veil over anything was cutting through it.

★

"Boss," McGee interrupted Gibbs going over the security breach's implications with Mosely. Beale had interrupted his search once to explain as much about the worm program as he could: it was brilliant, used math that was beyond state of the art and would have taken tremendous amounts of processing power to assemble. Genius, really. Despite the horrific implications Beale couldn't hide how impressed he was. You could lock every Chinese, Russian and Korean hacker in a room with the best computers made and they couldn't come up with that worm in a hundred years, Beale had
fanboyed. He wanted to meet the people who wrote it.

Gibbs did too, only he didn't want to congratulate them and pick their brains. He wanted to bury them in a hole.

"What?" Gibbs barked at McGee for the interruption. He'd known those damn people in London were off somehow. If they had a program that could crack US cybernetic security and edit the systems, then they could control anything from air traffic control, to nuclear subs, hospital records and equipment, police, and military communications networks – it was all connected and if it wasn't, it was practically useless in this world. If Doran's people had that power, it was a gun to the head of every government in the world. Between not wanting to be a victim of it and wanting to buy it to use against each other, there was nothing they wouldn't pay.

No wonder they thought they were untouchable.

Well, they were still just traitors to Gibbs and he was going to nail them to the goddamn wall.

"We've got Shepherd and McKay checking into a hotel in Vancouver," McGee said.

The sister.

He had to call Vance.

They were going to need strings pulled. This would need to be a covert extraction. They'd need back-up and fast transport back to the US. The Canadians wouldn't want to extradite one of their own and a Maltese citizen to the US for unspecified 'reasons' and if they did know what those people had been up to, they'd damn well want to keep those two for themselves. Hell, McKay might even be patriotic enough to give them what Gibbs was going to have to break him to get.

At least he could be confident Vance wouldn't blow this operation to Hetty, though her little catspaw here in ops had probably already let her know what they'd uncovered so far.

"I want the fastest transport to Vancouver possible," he told McGee. "Make sure no one in OSP knows." Damn, he wished he could lock them all up.

"I'll put the office in a lockdown drill after you leave," Mosely said. "No communications, no exits for twelve hours."

Gibbs gave her a nod. She was a smart one. "That'll work."

"I'll have cars waiting for us at the airport," McGee promised and bolted out of the office.

"Where are you going to take them?" Mosely asked.

"Better you don't know."

She nodded slowly. "I know this just got bigger than one OSP team, but get them back if you can."

"I will," Gibbs promised.

Nothing in years had given him as much satisfaction as cuffing and bagging McKay and Shepherd, whoever he really was, in years.

"No lawyers," Gibbs told Shepherd once he had him in an interrogation room. "No diplomatic
immunity, no video, no audio, no Geneva convention. No one knows where you are, and no one is going to find you."

Shepherd gave the chains attaching his hands to the table a little rattle and smiled lazily at Gibbs.

"No shit? Sounds like fun."

**Vala**

When the Tau'ri cellphones failed to reach Jehan and Mer, she tried their comms.

The comms were dead.

The only way and only reason for those comms to have died was destruction, physical or failsafe.

There was more to those comms than there seemed though and even destroyed functionally, they could be tracked. The microscopic beads of naquadah that powered them had an energy signature that stood out like a flare on most planets, even one with a power grid and nuclear technology.

Even if Jehan and Mer had been separated from the comms, whoever had them would know something. Very few humans were capable of withstanding interrogation under the pain of a kara'kesh, and right now Vala wasn't feeling very merciful.

She'd known she shouldn't have let those two to go visit Mer's sister alone.

"Find them," she ordered. "Shields up, internal alert level four, and comm *Aurora* and *Tempestas*. I want one of them ready to take control of the Antarctica installation. Give me targeting solutions for the Tau'ri ships and Cheyenne Mountain and keep them updated."

The bridge crew obeyed smoothly, though their faces were grim. They'd done something similar under Mer's command when Ba'al had Vala, Jehan and Teyla. Before that, there had been the Dorchester attack. After, there had been the OSP team infiltrating the Quindozum warehouse complex, necessitating its early shut down. Earth hadn't been secure against threats and no one took the alerts lightly.

Vala knew even the former Tau'ri on the crews would do whatever had to be done.

The alert tone sounded through *Revenge*. It was an unpleasant harmonic that put nerves on edge; it couldn't be slept through or ignored. It would keep sounding at random intervals to make sure no one relaxed. Similar alerts were ringing through the other ships within moments. If someone tried to use Jehan or Mer to take the ships, the crews would be ready and waiting. They weren't at battle stations, but they were ready to engage. Lighting was dimmed to make reading screens easier and faster.

"Keep an eye on *Daedalus* and anything else moving," Vala told Signe.

She commed Ronon and Haemi next with the situation.

"What's wrong?" Haemi asked as soon as she reached the bridge. Ronon was right behind her.

"Plans to beam into the prison and take the Kim woman are ready," he reported when he walked onto the bridge. "Mann will beam down with us, make sure we get the right one. We'll use stunners and zats."

"That can wait. Jehan and Mer's comms are dead. Phones too."
Ronon had been relaxed, but he and Haemi both came to attention. "What happened?" Haemi demanded.

"Don't know yet," Vala said. "I want Jack O'Neill on my screen in the next ten minutes. Or we’ll find our people and go in hard ourselves. This shit is over."

"Got the location on the comms," Signe announced. "They go dead yesterday in Vancouver. They are in Washington DC now."

Vala hissed under her breath.

"O'Neill on screen one."

"Captain Mal Doran, what the hell do you want?" O'Neill looked exhausted. "I've got better things to do than –"

"You're about to wish the Ori had gotten here first," Vala interrupted him. "And also find out what an Alteran warship can do to your world."

O'Neill scowled at her from the screen. "Don't threaten my planet. What the hell?"

"You have an hour to find my people, O'Neill," Vala stated. "Mer and Jehan were visiting Mer's sister. They are missing. Their comms, which have been disabled by interference, are in your capitol. Get them back or I will, and you will not like how I do it."
Chapter 19

Jack

Jack found Gibbs at a coffee cart outside the Navy Yard. Personally, he preferred coffee inside and not on the street, but the cart was Gibbs' excuse to get out of the office and remove his oversight from his team. Gibbs could get coffee inside if he wanted it.

The sticky heat, the clouds of car exhaust, the sheer number of people on the streets and the noise of voices, engines, the endless subliminal hum of power lines reminded Jack of how long it had been since he'd gone off-world. The quiet and the clean air of those undeveloped worlds they'd stepped onto through the stargate were a distant dream.

Hetty's girl at OSP had called her as soon as she could, but that was still over twelve hours behind Gibbs. The sanctimonious sonovabitch hadn't cost them the Alteran ship, that offer had already been withdrawn thanks to Ba'al and the Lucian Alliance crawling all over Earth. But unless Gibbs' newest stunt screwed them there might still be a chance to keep the Pegasans as allies and Atlantis as a place they could retreat to if the Ori overran the planet.

He nodded to the guy running the cart and gave his own order. He needed the caffeine. "You've screwed everyone."

Gibbs smirked.

"You motherfucking moron," Jack told Gibbs. He added a Jaffa curse that translated as 'an empty egg-pouch' which had once made Teal'c nearly kill a guy. Words were failing him. He felt like killing Gibbs. Stupid, controlling, blind, idiot sonovabitch. Jack knew; he shared most of Gibbs' flaws. He knew Gibbs had hated him since Poland, but Jack hadn't hated him until now.

Gibbs gave him a sour look. "These people hacked NCIS secure systems. They're a threat to national security."

Jack thought about the two starships orbiting above them, the weapons they had, and the woman willing to use them on Earth. Gibbs wasn't wrong, except he was a goddamn idiot who didn't know he was ass deep in boiling shit and dragging everyone else in with him.

"Funny thing." As in not funny at all, Jack let his tone say. "They are now. We are one bad decision away from a war."

One that even winning would still mean they lost, because every damn study, every politician and social scientist and psychiatrist the SGC had pulled in said the same thing: this world was not ready for declassification. The specter of aliens, the damage to world religions, the new technologies that would flood the market-- it would destabilize economies, governments, and societies. They'd be facing civil and religious wars, suicides, cults, and who knows what else. It would be the biggest clusterfuck in history and that was if Vala Mal Doran didn't play Pied Piper for the Wraith or the Ori didn't show up to sweep up the remains.

Gibbs snorted uncouthly. "Canada isn't going to throw away good relations over one scientist, even if we did cut some corners pulling him across the border."

"Cut some corners," Jack repeated flatly. "Illegal arrest, kidnapping and detention. Don't under-
estimate how much Canada hates the current booby in the Oval Office either. They're about one insult away from building their own wall."

"Not my problem, I didn't vote for him." Gibbs sipped his coffee and looked smug. Jack considered throwing his coffee in Gibbs' face.

"And don't even try convincing anyone the Maltese have enough pull to influence us," Gibbs added. "Besides, they've been paid. They won't care what happens to Shepherd or whoever he really is as long as it doesn't come back on them."

"It isn't the Maltese I'm worried about, you ass. Vala Mal Doran can come back on us like the wrath of the gods." Christ. Jack ran his hand over his face. "She could leave this world a smoking ruin."

"That's why we need to stop her and get everything we can out of these guys."

"We need to stop alienating allies and give Sheppard and McKay back before we lose even more than we already have," Jack snarled at him.

"The Air Force doesn't tell NCIS what to do."

"Apparently the President doesn't either, or any laws you don't like," Jack said. Gibbs wasn't going to shift.

He would send in SG-1 – over Hank's protests – but they were off-world getting Barrett de-snaked. Maybe it was a good thing; they'd have deniability. Whatever Jack did, it would splash his old team. Off-world, 'over seas', or just signed in and not out of the Mountain, made for a good alibi. Mitchell and Danny would be okay along with Teal'c and Jonas.

If he didn't want Mal Doran sending down shock troops to take back her people in a commando raid, Jack was going to have to go into NCIS with his own soldiers and take them back. Since the point of not letting the Pegasans do it was to hide their existence along with their technology, they'd have to do it the old-fashioned way: with guns. Someone would sure as hell end up shot.

Using the armed forces against a federal agency would fuck Jack's career to hell and gone. Hell, he might end up in jail if the wrong fool whispered in the nincompoop's ear.

He'd have to do it anyway.

It wasn't that he liked running Homeworld. He preferred fishing and beer, a good hockey game, and opera on vinyl records. But he couldn't enjoy any of those things when he knew there was no one who could do his job as well as him. Despite everything, Jack still believed in his duty, a duty to the whole damn, stupid, oblivious world.

Deeks

"Uh oh," Marty said when the lights dimmed and a skin-crawling alert began sounding everywhere. They were in the mess, lingering over chow because there really wasn't anything else to do if you weren't crew.

The crew usually seemed as laid back and amiable as a bunch of space hippies, but now they jolted
into fast, focused motion. Til, their minder for the day, drew a zat and knocked Sam out without warning as the mess hall emptied.

"Why did you do that?" Kensi demanded. She was ready to tackle Til herself, if he hadn't still had the zat in his hand.

"No time to put up with his shit," Til explained. "You and you." He pointed to Marty and Callen. "Carry him."

"What about our breakfast?" Callen asked.

"You," Til pointed to Kensi. "Grab a bag from that locker under the counter, fill it with rations from the locker beside it." He indicated the cabinet in question.

Kensi looked mutinous but did as she was told. The brick-sized brown items didn't look like MREs – maybe they were the Satedan survival rations Ronon had threatened them with the first day.

Marty and Callen slung Sam's unconscious, heavy-as-lead body between them, arm over each of their shoulders, and drag-carried him back towards home sweet home: the brig.

The corridors were mostly empty, the lighting dimmed down except for a periodic flash of emergency red. All the hatches were closed; Marty hadn't seen that before. The only people they saw were moving quickly, with a purpose. All of them were armed.

"Any idea what's going on?" Callen asked curiously as they approached the hatch that opened into the cell.

"Your world is crawling with Goa'uld, including Ba'al, and Lucian Alliance," Til said. "They've already made attempts at our people twice, could be another try. Or it could be the Ori ahead of schedule." He shrugged his massive shoulders. Til, as far as Marty had observed, was not a chatty guy. That was more words threaded together than he'd heard from him before in total. And he wasn't done. "Could be anything."

"And the Ori are…?" Callen asked leadingly as the hatch opened. They dragged Sam in and lowered him onto the floor. Marty didn't feel guilty for leaving him there; the floor was cushioned. Besides, Sam had been such an ass lately he was lucky Marty hadn't just dropped him.

"I'm guessing they're bad news," Marty commented.

"Powerful religious fanatics from another galaxy who worship ascended Originators," Til said, like that was useful information. Okay, 'religious fanatic' was more than enough to alarm a person. Til didn't sound interested in expanding on who or what ascended Originators were. Marty figured he wouldn't like them anyway.

"Ooooh-kay," Callen drawled.

"If we go to battle stations you will be as safe here as anywhere on the ship."

"Comforting," Marty muttered.

Til heard him and nodded decisively. "You have water, plumbing, and rations."

Kensi clutched the bag of rations tighter.

"If we lose gravity," Til added as the hatch began closing, "Daniel Jackson and Lindsay Novak
recommend holding onto the base of the toilet and each other. That will keep you from hitting the walls or ceiling during maneuvers."

Over the hiss of the hatch sealing Callen and Kensi shared looks with Marty. Callen was the one to speak, though: "Maneuvers would be… like the ship having a firefight in space."

"Okay, yeah," Marty agreed and sat down. "This sucks rocks."

It could have sucked more. Sam woke up after an hour. The gravity thankfully didn't go out, so they didn't end up needing to hug the stainless throne. The lights stayed on. Marty had thought about that though: what it would like in the brig, with no windows or ports, no ambient or reflected natural illumination at all, if the lights went out. Dead black, like being buried, and if the lights went then the ventilation would probably follow, and their cell would become like a large, cold coffin.

He refrained from mentioning any of that to the others. He'd never been one to share his nightmares.

Sometime in the second shift, which Marty arbitrarily thought of as afternoon, the hatch cycled open. It wasn't just Til on the other side. Ronon and Haemi were waiting, along with two teams of geared-up commandos. Suddenly, the pirates looked more like pirates: a collection of renegades and raiders, armed to the teeth, without a shred of mercy between them.

"With us," Haemi said. She was hard as nails on a good day, only smiling for Teyla Emmagan, but today her set expression communicated anger.

Marty fought down the urge to say it wasn't me.

After exchanging quick glances, they all fell into line and walked to the transporters. They were just elevators, but they were on a spaceship. Elevator didn't sound impressive enough, plus there was no real up or down in space beyond what the artificial gravity provided.

Callen and Sam went with Ronon and three others.

Marty and Kensi got squeezed in with Haemi and her team. He assumed the rest of the shock troops would follow.

They ended up on the bridge. A giant front port showed them Earth below them, blue and green and brown and clouded white. It took Marty's breath away every time he saw it.

Another screen showed blue diamonds and the paths of their orbits. Each had a little label in another language next it. The screen showed a pair of orange icons too. The labels next to them were in English: Apollo and Daedalus. Marty figured it wasn't a big leap to figure those were Earth's ships. Multiple white pinpoints had to various satellites and a lone larger one must be the International Space Station. Far out, almost beyond the display, a red triangle was labeled in yet another language that looked almost like hieroglyphs. Marty wasn't sure, but he thought it was coming closer.

"How come no one sees your ship?" Marty asked.

"Cloaking," said the Czech guy who had been one of Quindozum's leaders. Greene had been his fake name. He looked far more comfortable here, with a tablet in his hand, sitting at a console, monitoring whatever the graphs it showed meant, than he had in an expensive suit playing at businessman slash black marketeer. "No one can see us, but our sensors are better. We see everything."
"Get me the firing solution for the ha'tak as soon as it's in range," Vala ordered. "I don't like this. The timing is no coincidence."

The third screen showed video of what had to be an office on Earth. There was a limp American flag hanging in one corner. A two-star Air Force general with iron gray hair and dark eyes stood next to Hetty.

He was saying, " – look, Gibbs has the bit between his teeth and the fact you hacked the same systems we use to control our nukes has bought him backing from enough people in power to make this a problem."

"Your problem," Vala Mal Doran snapped at him.

"Kidnapping an NCIS team didn't reflect well on you either," Hetty mentioned.

"Hey, Hetty," Callen greeted her.

She did her little chin lift in acknowledgement. "Mr. Callen, Mr. Hanna, Mr. Deeks, Ms. Blye. I see you are well, as I was assured."

"Hetty, are you going to get us out of here?" Kensi asked.

"In due time."

"Right now, NCIS has dropped us in the shitter," the general said.

"NCIS seems to have a problem obeying orders," Teyla said from her place beside Vala.

Czech guy snorted under his breath.

"Pot meet kettle," the general said. He rolled his shoulders. "Listen, Gibbs is an ass, but he's not torturing your people any more than you're torturing our guys."

"I have bruises," Sam muttered.

"You deserve them, Mr. Hanna," Hetty told him tartly. "You should not have been where you were."

"Yeah, okay, my bad," Callen said. "My idea. What's going on?"

"Jethro has illegally arrested Dr. McKay and Mr. Sheppard and transported them from Vancouver here to Washington," Hetty explained. Her pinched expression grew dark. "They are being held and interrogated without charge or exercise of their civil rights."

"Well, crap," Marty said.

"Indeed, Mr. Deeks. If we do not extract our Pegasan friends from NCIS holding, I suspect this will escalate from a diplomatic incident to active hostilities."

"The last thing we need is another shooting war in space," O'Neil said wearily. "We've got enough enemies already."

"So how are we going to keep that from happening?" Callen asked.

"That is why you and your team are here," Hetty said.
"We can avoid anyone getting shot if we can just get a couple of comms to Sheppard and McKay," the general said. "Hetty has a plan. She has a high enough clearance to get in to see them in holding."

"It's a one-time shot," Hetty said, "and the difficulty lies in the certainty that they are being held separately. I will have limited time before Gibbs is notified of my presence at the holding cells. Not, I fear, enough time to get comms to them both."

"I get both of them back, unharmed, or we're going in to get them," Vala stated.

"What happens once they have the comms?" Kensi asked.

"We beam them out. Our technology can punch through Alteran and Asgard shielding," Czech guy said. "Meredith has 'improved' everything on this ship." He sighed. "I will not say this to him, but he is smart as he thinks he is."

"You're talking about busting prisoners out of NCIS," Sam said.

"Illegally taken and unlawfully held," Hetty stressed.

"There'll be no way to hide that you helped them escape, though," Callen pointed out. "There must be another way."

"Oh, there is," the general said. "I go in with a platoon of Marines. Shit gets all over the media. Someone does something stupid; someone gets shot. If we're unlucky, it'd be Sheppard or McKay -"

"Then Vala shoots the SGC's ships out of the sky, along with your communication satellites, Miko uses the Tempestas' drones to rip through your military, and the whole world goes insane with the revelation that aliens are here and pissed." Czech Guy shrugged. "We won't nuke you, but there would be casualties. Is inevitable."

"I think my career and even my freedom are little enough to sacrifice in order to forestall that eventuality," Hetty said. "There is some question of what anyone will be able to prove. After all, they would have to admit they are holding diplomatic personnel prisoner to show cause to fire or prosecute me."

"Not to mention the embarrassment factor," the general added. "How'd they escape? They wiggled their noses, clicked their heels and poof! They disappeared." He chuckled at the prospect. For a staff officer, the guy sure looked forward to sticking it to the Man. Even if he was the Man.

"You need someone to go in with you," Marty said.

"I do."

"I won't," Sam said. "I can't. My kids – they've already lost Michelle. I don't want them dealing with me in jail." Genuine regret at not being able to back her was clear in his voice.

"I'm sorry, Hetty," Callen said, "but I'm with Sam on this. It feels too much like treason." His voice cracked, and Marty realized it was immensely hard for Callen to tell her no. Callen's loyalty to Hetty wasn't something that had ever been shaken and Callen wasn't the sort of man to abandon anyone he cared about. He'd been the one to take the lead searching for Hetty when she disappeared. He hadn't hesitated to bend or break rules to go into Vietnam to get her back. Hetty was the closest thing Callen had to family, along with his team. Saying no to her was a painful choice.
Callen could be a smarmy asshole at times, but he was a good man. Hell, Sam was, too, when he wasn't being an arrogant dick. And Sam had his kids. No way should Sam being doing something that might end with him locked up. He was right and Marty agreed with his choice. For him.

"I understand," Hetty said gently, without resentment or disappointment. "Ms. Blye?"

"No," Kensi said. She shook her head. "I'm not – I just can't."

Marty had been weighing the pros and cons. Hetty was right too.

"I'll do it," he said.

Vala, Czech Guy, Ronon and Teyla turned to consider him. The rest of the crew remained intent on their stations.

"Deeks!" Kensi exclaimed. "No, you can't. You'll be fired – if you aren't thrown in prison."

He shrugged. "You know Mosely's going to get rid of me as soon as Hetty's out of the picture. I might as well go big. Besides, I like Jehan and Meredith. I'm still a cop and they are being illegally detained."

Hetty gave him a silent nod.

"That's what I was hoping to hear," the general commented. He dusted his hands together. "No time like the present. You want to get down here with those comms? We'll get this show on the road."

"Should have known," Sam muttered. Then he gave Marty a nod of respect and held out his hand to shake.

Marty took it and Sam pulled him into a crushing hug. "You will always be part of our team," he said, half promise, half threat. "Do what you have to do."

"Take these three back to the brig," Vala instructed.

"Deeks," Kensi called. "Think about this –"

"Kens – I'm sorry."

"You idiot." She was looking back to him until the door closed. But she didn't say she loved him and she didn't ask him to stay. He knew he was making the right choice.

Hetty was still on the screen. She sighed heavily. "You are giving up more than I am, Mr. Deeks."

"No, I don't think so," he said.

"Neither of you need to stay behind," Teyla said. She touched Marty's arm gently. "The offer to come with us was genuine."

"Yeah, I don't know. It's –" Marty gestured to the port view of Earth. "That's my world. I don't know if I'm ready to say good-bye to it."

"If you aren't, Homeworld has a place for a good civilian investigator," the general said.

Marty looked at Hetty. He wanted to talk to her – privately – before he decided to leave Earth behind.
"Later, Mr. Deeks," she said, probably not reading his mind, but always a mile ahead of everyone else.

Vala turned her attention to Marty. "You're sure?" she asked. She was still tense, but less angry. "You get crew share for doing crew work. Both of you."

"Come with us," Teyla entreated and, whoa, she was hard to deny. "You are a friend now and I do not like to leave my friends behind."

"I'll think about it." He'd talk to Hetty about it.

"Come on," the Czech said. "I'll fit you with a comm, one for Ms. Lange, and a set for Jehan and Meredith."
Chapter 20

Jack

Mitchell beamed down to Jack's office with Barrett and Danny. None of them said a word until Jack had his bug zapper running. When they were done, Apollo would beam them back up. No one watching or listening to see who came and went from his office would know they'd been there.

Barrett hadn't been a host long. Small comfort; he'd never be the same even if it had only been hours. He looked like he'd been through the wringer backwards, then run over by train and dragged through hell by his hair.

And he only had one hand. The stump was still wrapped in gauze. Barrett's Goa'uld must have been a real piece of shit, even for a snake, to not heal him when the hand had been there to re-attach. Jack winced. Should he look? Should he not look? Did he ignore or sympathize or apologize? What way to act would be the least horrible for Barrett?

"We thought you'd better hear this from Malcolm," Mitchell said.

Danny hadn't said anything, but he nodded, which was a bad sign. Danny always had something to say about everything, and usually something that pissed Jack off. Since the Ori thing, though, he'd been quieter. Haunted. The thing with that French archaeologist that got killed to frame him and then Barrett getting snake hadn't helped, either. Jack was worried about what would happen to Earth, but Danny blamed himself for everything bad that happened to anyone in the galaxy.

Mitchell guided Barrett over to same chair he'd sat in last time he was in the office.

Jack wondered if Barrett had been snake then. No, he couldn't have been. Jack's unfortunate time hosting Kanan had left him with a naquadah sensitivity that would have made his skin crawl if Barrett had been hosting a Goa'uld. It made him uneasy even now, the same way he felt in Mal Doran or McKay's presence.

"You aren't going to like it," Mitchell added.

Jack just nodded tiredly. "I haven't liked anything except Sergeant Cho's coffee since I moved to DC. I'll survive the disappointment."

"Cho's the one who looks like she feeds her enemies to crocodiles?" Barrett asked. His voice was ruined, hoarse and breathless, like his lungs had been filled with acid and he'd had to cough it all out. Of course, when Ba'al did that to Jack, he'd died afterward, but there had been Ba’al’s sarcophagus.

"I tried to get her to feed my enemies to them, but she says they'd get too fat," Jack told him.

Mitchell choked off a laugh and Barrett managed a fleeting ghost of a smile. Welcome to the ex-host club.

"Go ahead," Mitchell said to Barrett.

"Hedjwar liked to boast," Barrett began.
Goa'uld all did. Megalomaniac narcissistic sadists.

"The Lucian Alliance was behind the attack on the Pegasans in London," Barrett said.

The attackers had zats and according to the information they'd given Hollis, they’d been Jaffa. Not really a surprise; the Lucians had recruited a lot of disaffected Jaffa. It had been a mistake to assume that once freed of the System Lords, the Jaffa would unite. They had fractured instead, sort of like the Soviet Union before the old guard glued it back together as the Russian Federation with blood and bribes. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss. Plenty of Jaffa had been happy serving the Goa'uld. They weren't grateful to have their gods and their faith yanked away from them. The Free Jaffa were only a portion of the Jaffa; plenty of others still despised humans and hated Tau'ri in particular.

All that was true, but it didn't jive with what happened in London. "They had a Goa'uld with them," Jack pointed out. Then a sinking feeling hit his gut. "Aww, crap."

"The Lucian Alliance has absorbed the remnants of the Trust," Daniel said, confirming his fears.

"Why'd you have to tell me that?" Jack complained. He looked at Barrett inquiringly. "Not the other way around?"

"The snakes have jumped ship," Mitchell offered.

"The Lucian Alliance offers more than one planet and a superior chance of taking over," Barrett confirmed grimly. "The one…the one in my head had ambitions to rule more than one world. It meant to steal large numbers of people from Earth to recreate the parts of our civilization that it liked."

"Random people? Good luck with that," Jack muttered. "Most people know less about why the switch makes the light come on than pigs do about hyperdrive physics."

"True," Daniel said regretfully.

"Try telling that to a Goa'uld," Barrett said. It wasn't exactly a joke, but it was something, a sign he might never be okay, but he'd be one of the ones who made it. A lot of hosts suicided after the extraction, either because they couldn't handle living for themselves after being under so long or because it was all they'd wanted while they were possessed.

Plenty of them just checked out. They weren't even there enough to try to die. *Something of the host survives.* Well, something of a coma patient did too: the body. But *something* wasn't enough with a lot of Goa'uld victims. Some of them didn't even understand what was going on. Jack had had rage and hate to hold onto when Kanan hijacked him. It had gotten him through it at least.

He hoped Barrett made it.

"The Lucians are following the Trust's strategy of infiltration and the three Bs," Barrett went on.

Daniel arched his brows. "Three Bs?"

"Bribery, battery and blackmail."

Jack nodded to himself. That hadn't changed since long before the Cold War. Buy 'em, beat 'em, or catch them with their hands in the cookie jar and their pants down and blackmail 'em. If they weren't corrupt, set them up so they looked like they were.
"Did, uh, Hedy Lamar –"


Jack waved his hand in a 'shoo, fly' gesture. He didn't care. Danny ought to know by now he mangled the snake's names deliberately. They didn’t rank the respect of being called what they liked.

He'd never once gotten Teal'c's name wrong.

"Your Goa'uld say how far they'd gotten? Or what the plan was with London?"

"London was supposed to get them the lead Pegasus people. They'd have been snaked and returned, and the Lucians would gain control of the Ancient ship," Barrett said.

"Stupid. Two of them are ex-hosts and all of them know about Goa'uld," Jack said. It was just like the snakes to be so over-confident. He shook his head in bemusement; that was why the Goa'uld had been able to take over the Trust. The Trust had been made up of power-hungry, over-privileged, greedy old white men. No one had been able to tell the difference when they had snakes in their heads.

"Yeah, you know, and I know, and even the Lucians knew, but that was their ultimate pie-in-the-sky result. Realistically they mainly just wanted to keep the Pegasans from allying with Earth." Barrett paused. His gaze grew distant. "And they wanted Vala Mal Doran dead. The Goa'uld and the Lucians both have a hard-on for her. The bounty is… impressive."

"You know, she'd probably have some comment about the Goa'uld having hard-ons," Danny remarked. "Something like how they should thank her."

Mitchell made a noise embarrassingly like a giggle. There were times Colonel Mitchell exhibited a distressingly frat boy sense of humor. Jack leveled a dark look at him in a useless attempt to make him straighten up.

"All right," Jack said, "this is interesting, but I could have guessed most of that. What's the really bad news?"

There was always something worse. There was always bad news. But you never kill the messenger because it was the things you didn't know that would get you killed. Gospel of St. Hetty. It was the things you said couldn't be true, because you didn't like them, that always were. Testament of General Jack O'Neill.

"Ba'al's on-world somewhere. The thing with Valtallon wasn't just to go after Daniel. It was a swipe at Ba'al."

Too bad he couldn't stuff all Earth's enemies in a bag and let them kill each other off.

"Old news."

Sheppard had extracted a lot of useful intel from Ba'al while his prisoner. Jack didn't care to contemplate how. It was not his goddamn business and he didn’t need any new nightmares. He had a hell of a lot of respect for the man, though, for holding it together and doing whatever it took to get that intel and get away. But it reminded him that Sheppard had already gone through hell and he didn't deserve to be rotting in NCIS's holding cells just because Leroy Jethro Gibbs had a bug up his ass.
He checked the old analog clock he'd had installed over the door into his office where he could see it over his guests' heads without being obvious. Tick-TOCK. He had a burner phone in his pocket. When Hetty and her boy were ready to go in, she'd call it from another burner. One ring. Then he'd zat the phone into nothingness and call Gibbs and start reaming him to buy them time. Hollis had provided a veritable laundry list of questionable shit Gibbs and his team had pulled over the last decade.

DoD had gone after Gibbs and his team before. An investigator named Parsons had even pushed Gibbs' MCRT team at the time – DiNozzo, McGee and David – into resigning to cover for him. Jack sneered inside at that. You didn't let your subordinates cover for you: you took care of them, even if you had to take a fall. That was why Hetty was going into NCIS today and putting a virtual bullet through the head of her long and storied career.

It was why he'd had Hollis hunting for where Jennifer Kim was being held. You took care of your own and you kept your goddamn word, even when you gave it to the enemy. Otherwise you were worthless.

Parsons' investigation should have seen Gibbs out on his ass, but he had friends. Or at least he had people who feared him or owed him favors.

So Jack wouldn't go after Gibbs. He'd go after the cases. He'd sick JAG on Gibbs, along with the Innocence Project, the ACLU, and the media. The ZNN vultures would eviscerate Gibbs and NCIS. The agency might survive, but Vance would have to get rid of Gibbs to do it when the convictions and court martials began over-turning. Aside from the military personnel NCIS had authority over, there were hundreds of civilians who'd had their civil rights trampled by Gibbs during his investigations. Laws had been bent and ignored over and over. The Attorney General would probably get into it too.

Sheppard and McKay weren't the first people Gibbs had denied their rights.

He shifted his attention back to Barrett. It probably was cruel to dismiss what Barrett had to offer as unneeded. The poor bastard was no doubt hanging on by his fingernails, and salvaging something from his ordeal was likely how he was staying sane.

"They've gotten to the Secretary of the Navy, NCIS Director Leon Vance, and the latest chief of staff," Barrett said.

Jack wondered if he'd gone pale to match how shocky he suddenly felt. He grabbed onto the edge of his desk. The news was deeply disturbing.

"Got to," he repeated. "How… do you mean? Snaked?"

"Not snaked, not yet, although there's a good chance the chief of staff is hosting one of the Trust's naquadah-less Goa'uld," Barrett replied. "SecNav has been promised Secretary of Defense."

"And Vance?" He'd pegged Vance as political and ambitious but not dirty.

"They've threatened his kids. He was told to let Gibbs have his head."

"Of course, he was."

No wonder Barrett looked sick. The present President could be talked into anything by someone willing to pander to his insecurities and ego…unless he got a wild hair and then neither love nor money nor cold rational facts could change his mind.
God, Jack missed Henry Hayes.

"They intend to discredit you, have you removed from Homeworld," Barrett went on. "I was supposed to kill you and any Pegasans I could at the White House."

"Well, nice to know I'm still appreciated," Jack said.

"Hedjwar didn't know the exact time line, but apparently the Lucians are also close to penetrating security at Area 51." Barret took a deep breath. "They know about the Dargol chemical. Once they have that, they'll be able to control the President and anyone else."

"We have to stop them, Jack," Danny said.

Jack laughed humorlessly. "Ya think?"

Hetty's burner chirped.

"Go," he said. "Get to Area 51. Secure the symbiote poison and Dargol supplies there – destroy them if you have to."

Unfortunately, Hetty was going to have to pull off her jailbreak without his distraction. He switched off the jammer as the Asgard beam snatched up his three visitors and opened his intercom. "Sergeant Cho. Put me through to General Landry immediately. Use the emergency hardline."

"Yes sir."

"Pick up the damn phone, Hank," he growled. He wanted the Mountain on alert and the iris on the stargate closed right now. Otherwise, he would have – should have – gone with SG-1. Asgard beams were a hell of lot faster than airplanes.

As soon as he'd lit a fire under Hank's ass he'd take advantage of the Daedalus being in orbit. Not Apollo; he didn't trust fully trust Abraham Ellis the way he did Caldwell. Even so, he might not be fast enough.

He had a shitty feeling that he was three steps behind and losing ground.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

So now it says 28 chapters because auburn can't count. The goal is still to have this all posted by next Friday though.

Ellie Bishop

Ellie didn't spend enough time in MTAC to feel as comfortable as McGee did. It was more the rarified realm of the director, assistant directors, team leads and the analyst techs who pulled up information and displayed it for them.

The room was geared to seat a lot of people for briefings, with tiered seating like a theater, but the dark expanse was always mostly empty. The dark was a bit of a relief after the pumpkin orange walls in the bullpen floor. Whoever made that decorating choice was either color blind or a budget cutter who got it on discount. The fluorescent lighting made everything worse. At night, without light from the windows and skylights, the bullpen had a horror movie vibe. Even the holding cells and interrogation rooms were easier on the eyes.

Ellie itched to sit down at the computer station and use MTAC's resources to run some comparison studies herself, but McGee had already displaced the regular analyst. Nick was sprawled in one of the seats and probably would have propped his feet on the next one if Vance hadn't been up front with Gibbs, Balboa and Sloane.

"There's a pattern," Vance said thoughtfully. He had his arms crossed, one elbow resting on a forearm so he could stroke his chin.

"I'll find it," McGee promised. He was already running three personally coded programs – he'd bragged about them to Delilah, who told Ellie at their last lunch – and began loading a fourth. MTAC had a lot of processing power, though nothing like the NSA boasted.

Meanwhile, the feeds from NCIS offices, from intel sources, other agencies, the Internet, and the media cycled through several subsidiary screens below the one showing the passport photos of Jehan Shepherd and Meredith McKay, along with smaller images of the people who had been with them in London and scanned versions of the hard copy surveillance photos from Cairo connecting them to Quindozum.

The incorporation documents, banking records and the few other physical tracks left by the vanished corporation were also on-screen.

Ellie was worried. The Director had backed Gibbs in snatching Shepherd and McKay from Vancouver. He'd even called in a favor that got them a private helicopter ride out to a Navy sub hunter well past the twelve-mile limit. They'd been hustled off the small helo and onto a Sea Stallion that took them south to the USS Ronald Reagan, flying on fumes by the time they arrived, their pilot tight-lipped and silent.

A navy commander who didn't offer his name had hurried them, along with Shepherd and McKay with bags over their heads and their hands zip tied behind them, to a C-2A Greyhound sitting ready
to take off, propellers already spun up. Ellie had realized she'd been with NCIS long enough and flown out to conduct investigations often enough to recognize the small cargo-passenger plane used to deliver special parts, personnel, and mail to aircraft carriers at sea.

It still made her nervous, because no matter how big the ship the deck still moved up and down. At least, taking off wasn't as bad as landing.

The Greyhound had flown them back to NAS Lemoore in Fresno. It was after dark by then and Ellie didn't see much more than the bagged prisoners could. They boarded another military transport and took off half an hour later, flying east. Someone had pulled strings: they were on one of the Navy's Clippers and wouldn't put down for refueling before they reached the East Coast.

None of them had had a chance to eat or sleep during the journey, since they had to watch the prisoners.

By the time they set down at a blacked-out airfield, Ellie had been so hungry she felt sick.

"Russia's Air Force military maneuver exercises have ramped up in the last week," the briefing analyst said. Ellie was annoyed with herself for forgetting his name. "Two squadrons of an unknown advanced fighter aircraft, NATO new designation Flicker, redeployed from a previously thought shut down base in Siberia two days ago. One appears to be tasked with flying CAP over Moscow." The analyst had a narrow face and needed a shave. His voice was conspicuously flat. "The other flew into one of their bases in Archanglslk."

"Close enough to strike across the Bering Sea?" Vance asked.

Ellie wondered if it was coincidence that they'd picked up Shepherd and McKay two days ago?

"We don't know their range or speed. The CIA's asset in Archanglslk managed a single cellphone picture before Internet connections were cut off. It showed what appeared to be single-seat frontline fighter."

"Satellite intel?" Balboa asked. "I thought the Su-57s the Israelis identified in Syria were the most advanced thing they have."

"Guess not," Gibbs said in a dry voice.

The analyst shook his head. "Everything is under cover. The weather hasn't been cooperating either. Chatter is the Russians have someone in every radio and television station ready to shut them down along with phones and the Internet. And a dozen higher ups in the Ministry of Defense are suddenly 'unavailable'."

"Not our remit for the moment," Vance said. "But it is disturbing."

"But it sure looks like they've cleaned house and geared up for something going to shit in a big way," Gibbs commented.

"You think this has something to do with O'Neill's operation?"

"O'Neill's got a stranglehold on whatever's going on to match Putin's old Chekists, Leon. But he's livid over us picking up Shepherd and McKay."

Vance looked like he trying to chew and swallow a raw sea slug: disgusted, determined and about to hurl. Ellie noted the bags under his eyes, the bruised look that came with lack of sleep, the subtle sag of flesh, and the skin drawn tight over his cheekbones. The look he gave Gibbs was not
friendly. She had to wonder why he'd done so much to let Gibbs have his way.

"You'd better be right about this, Gibbs," he said. He sounded tired on top of disgusted. Not like someone who was backing his subordinate because he thought he was right. He nodded to the analyst. "Go on, Rudy."

That was it. Rudy Banks. Ellie had run into him in the break room a few times. He drank lemon-ginger tea and brought in his own honey instead of sugar. He was always polite and looked at her face and not her boobs.

"Yes. There have been two terror attacks, in London and Paris, perpetrated by unknowns. No one has come forward to credibly claim responsibility. In each case, the attackers succeeded in withdrawing with their own casualties, increasing the difficulty of identifying them," Rudy continued.

Ellie thought O'Neill and the people who were attacked knew very well who they were, but they weren't talking. Even now, with a pair of them in separate holding cells.

She'd sat in on the McKay's first interrogation. He'd been annoyed, then amused, then bored. Nothing Gibbs tried made an impact, not even when he yelled and slammed his fist down on the table between them. McKay had rolled his eyes. "Are you trying to bore me into talking? Funny. I'm always being told I talk too much."

Finally, he sneered and told them to roll up his sleeve. His hands were big and capable, a worker's hands, and sprinkled with white scars, burn marks, and calluses. But his arm was terrible. Inch-wide white scar tissue spiraled from wrist to elbow. It was so precise it could only have been done deliberately. At first Ellie thought it must be some sort of ritual scarification. Then she realized it had been done to him and gasped.

McKay had looked at her and then Gibbs. "Think you can stomach it, Agent Gibbs?" he asked. "Gonna tune me up? Maybe waterboard me? Maybe rape's your thing. Ever been flayed?" His mouth twisted, dipping on one side. The cold contempt had been frightening. "I don't recommend it. Or doing it. My friends got hold of the guy who did this."

"I can bury you in a hole where you'll never see the light of day again," Gibbs said. "Your 'friends' aren't going to find you."

McKay laughed at him. "You should hope they do."

It was the last thing he'd said, no matter how Gibbs raged at him.

"Think about it," Gibbs had said when Ellie had been afraid he really would lose his temper and make it physical. Then he walked out.

Ellie had lingered a minute longer.

McKay lifted his eyebrows in silent inquiry, then rattled the manacles chained the floor. "I'm afraid I can't get the door for you."

"We wouldn't do that," Ellie had said. "We aren't that kind of people."

"Oh, I know. You're just ignorant and sanctimonious. It's particularly American really. And it costs you more than you ever know." Despite the insults he'd rained on the NCIS team in London, his eyes weren't mean. "Go away," he added. "Stupidity makes me grumpy."
"BISHOP!" Gibbs had shouted for her and she had hurried out.

Rudy the analyst was droning on, new pictures and documents blooming on the screens. "Black site Ceramic Mantle has lost a prisoner, a North Korean woman. Assumption is she died during implemented interrogation and they've blinded the surveillance camera in the cell with a flash grenade to make it look like she 'disappeared' from there."

"The Kim woman?" Vance asked.

"Yes sir."

"Granger's kid?" Gibbs asked.

"Yeah."

"He's going to make it ugly."

"I know."

Vance nodded for Rudy to go on.

"Interpol remains stymied on the murder of Professor Paul Valtallon in Paris. They were tipped the murderer was Dr. Daniel Jackson, an Air Force contractor, but Jackson's alibi is airtight."

"Don't tell me, he was with Jack O'Neill," Gibbs said snidely.

"In the Oval Office with General O'Neill, the President, and the Joint Chiefs," Rudy reported.

"Moving on," Vance said. "If Interpol asks for our help, we will of course provide it, within the parameters of NCIS' authority. Otherwise, not our business. We're supposed to investigate crimes affecting the Navy and Marines."

"Yes sir," Rudy said. "Ah, you may not consider this pertinent either, but former Navy and Marine personnel may be involved either actively or as victims – there's a list appended, which may be incomplete – "

"Just get to the point."

Rudy nodded.

"In the last week over a thousand people, all with at least a connection to someone with a high clearance or who was denied one, including a higher than could be coincidental number of former military including Navy and Marines, have disappeared. Entire extended families, down to the dogs and cats and in one case a parrot, have vanished between one day and the next. Some had scheduled vacations or recently quit their jobs, others are simply gone. An analyst caught the uptick in missing persons reports."

Over a thousand people gone, Ellie thought. That was… how did anyone outside of a government handle the actual logistics of that, even if the people in question left voluntarily? Sure, a major hotel in Las Vegas or some other vacation spots could house that many, but it would draw attention. The only other organizations that dealt with moving so many people were the military ones.

"People go missing all the time," Vance pointed out, though he didn't sound convinced himself.

"A significant ratio of the missing ex-military, over two hundred, were discharged under DADT or
forced out for a variety of reasons – whistleblowers, officers who complained of or prosecuted
criminal or sexual assault incidents, a couple who were even court martialed and did time in
Leavenworth,” Rudy said after consulting the tablet in his hand.

"Misfits," Vance said.

"Soldiers with enough spine to stand up to and refuse illegal orders in some of these cases," Gibbs
disagreed as he squinted and read one of the reports on the screen. "Marine Sergeant Lupé
Montoya, discharged after breaking the jaw and cheekbone of Captain Albert Simmons when he
caught him raping a female private."

"What happened to Captain Simmons?" Ellie blurted.

"According to this, nothing," McGee said. "The private claimed it wasn't rape, was discharged too,
and Simmons was transferred to a different base. He probably got a lecture about keeping it in his
pants around his subordinates, but nothing went on his record. That's sick."

"Sounds like a piece of shit," Nick commented from where Ellie had thought he was stealth
napping.

"Any of them active duty Navy or Marines?" Gibbs asked.

"No one on active duty," Rudy confirmed. "That we know about."

"What do you think?" Gibbs asked Vance. "Are they recruiting people with a legit axe to grind with
the military or the government?"

"Could be."

"I don't know," Nick said. "Look at that list. Botanists, farmers, veterinarians, nurses, mechanics,
electricians, engineers, there's a music teacher, at least ten varieties of cop… " He shook his head.
"That guy there managed an entire international hotel/restaurant chain."

Ellie looked at the list again. "Even the ex-military all have professions, EMTs, carpenters,
plumbers, welders, building crews, professional fishermen, factory foreman."

"Still could have a grudge against the military or the government," Gibbs insisted.

Ellie ignored him. "These people aren't frontline troops, most of them never were. They're
infrastructure."

"Ah, the disappearances are not confined to the US," Rudy added. He looked apprehensive about
sticking in his two cents. "It's reflected in everything we've been able to pick up from other
countries with reporting functions for this kind of thing."

"So probably some missing from countries where they don't keep obsessive head counts of their
populations too," Nick said. "Interesting." He drew out the last word with a lot of accent. It was
annoying. Nick was annoying. Sometimes. He was a lot like Tony really, a lot of masks, being a
smart ass, willing to look ridiculous to make others in the team feel better. Ellie didn't feel like she
knew him that well yet, but she knew he'd have her back.

"I want someone to start a case file and look into this," Vance said, decision made. "Marines and
sailors, former or not, are NCIS business. If they've been taken against their will or even are
involved in something inimical to the interests of the United States, we need to find them."
Gibbs coughed. "Think our best chance at answers are down in holding, Leon."

"What?"

"A hell of a lot of those names were on the list of people Quindozum hired Kolcheck to do background checks on."

"And they've disappeared, into thin air, like the OSP team," Nick said.

"Which ties it all back to O'Neill's program and whatever they're doing," Ellie said.

"Maybe Colonel – former Colonel – Mann could tell us something," McGee suggested. "She's working for him, but she knows us."

That might be the problem, Ellie thought, but kept it to herself. She sure as hell wouldn't spill classified information to or for Jake, thank you very much, not even before the divorce. Her ex could gargle ghost peppers now as far as she was concerned, and his little side piece could go sit on a cactus.

Gibbs might not have cheated on Hollis, but he'd been an asshole in London. She had little reason to help them and every reason to maintain operational security unless she wanted to end up somewhere like Ceramic Mantle. Gibbs never seemed to take the consequences for other people into account when he wanted something.

Colonel Mann, US Army, Retired, hadn't taken his guff. Nor was McGee much of a sweet talker. If she picked up her phone, she'd likely hang up on him.

"Call Colonel Mann," Gibbs told McGee. "She might talk to you."

"Push them in the interrogation," Vance said. "Find out what the hell is going on. Find our OSP team."

"We're working on that, Leon," Hetty Lange said from the door. How she'd managed to get into MTAC without anyone noticing the door open baffled Ellie. Was she really that good?

"Hetty," Vance greeted her in a dry voice. His gaze darted to the lanky, dirty blond man just behind her. "Detective Deeks."

"Where's the rest of your team?" Gibbs demanded.

"Well, see, that's what we're hoping to figure out," Deeks replied. "They separated us yesterday – that's when they got sloppy with me. Sam's been the 'bad prisoner' who keeps trying to escape. I was the cooperative one – no one wanted Kensi acting friendly in case someone thought she was 'friendly', you know? Anyway, I managed to pick up a pen off the floorboards of the van they moved me in when Sam and Callen pitched a fit as a distraction. Around four this morning I picked the lock on the room they moved me to and got out. I knocked out the guard coming out of the bathroom. I looked for the others, but it was just me there."

"How'd you get here that fast?"

"Because he was being held not far outside Silver Spring," Hetty took up the story. "After Mr. Deeks escaped, he searched the premises, then used the cell phone he took off the guard to call the LA office. Ms. Jones traced his location, contacted me, and I retrieved him. He debriefed to me verbally on the drive back here."
"I want the address where you were held," Gibbs demanded.

"Of course, Jethro," Hetty told him and recited a Maryland address. "it's a disused industrial park, owned by a shell company. Miss Jones and Mr. Beale are endeavoring to trace it back the true owners right now."

"Probably this Quindozum outfit," Nick commented. "Good job getting yourself loose," he added to Deeks.

"Doesn't look like they treated you too bad," McGee said. "Boss, Colonel Mann's account with the phone company has been closed. Ah, along with her bank accounts and everything else. It kind of looks like she's gone, no forwarding."

Ellie could see Gibbs didn't like that. She didn't either. It fit the timing of all those other disappearances. And Hollis Mann fit the loose profile they had, too; she was former military, smart, skilled, and had few serious attachments and no current personal obligations like an ill parent or children. Ellie was suddenly reminded of the old Pony Express advertisement for riders: Orphans Preferred.

"Something is moving beneath the waters," Hetty said with a nod to the MTAC screens and Rudy.

"And the attacks in London and Paris?" Nick asked. He shot Gibbs a cautious glance but went on. "They were aimed at these people, whoever they really are."

"Indeed, Mr. Torres, I believe we are seeing a clandestine conflict spilling into a covert one."

"Someone is losing and getting too desperate to care," Vance stated.

"Or they're winning and don't have to care anymore," Nick said. He'd spent much of his career in deep cover working in Central and South America, where the criminal and political were too entwined to separate. He'd operated in failed states where drug cartels controlled more than the government did or were indistinguishable from the latter.

"That too," Hetty agreed.

"I want him debriefed," Gibbs declared with a pointed glare at Deeks.

Deeks shrugged amiably. "Whatever you say, man, but the clock's running. There's maybe another hour before they switch guards and find I'm gone."

"Debriefing can wait," Hetty agreed. "I'm sure you have done a marvelous job as the bad cop, Jethro. Mr. Deeks and I will take advantage of that and speak to Mr. Shepherd and Dr. McKay. I believe one of us will be able to persuade them to reveal where our other agents are being held."

"I'm not letting you near them."

"Time is running out, Jethro. This group is on the move. Mr. Callen, Mr. Hanna, and Miss Blye are in greater danger than ever." Hetty sounded dispassionate and dry. Not lying, but not as concerned as Ellie would have expected from her.

"What she said," Deeks added. Ellie couldn't get a read on him. He was projecting an air of surfer dude cool rather than fear or anger. He was an undercover specialist, though; you would need to know him very well to read any of his tells. Guys like him kept their real feelings to themselves and drank themselves into oblivion when and where no one could see them fall apart.
"Not your call, Gibbs," Vance over ruled him. "You have my authorization, Henrietta. Go. Balboa, prep three hard entry teams. They may all be in separate locations."

"Let's hope they're all close enough to get to," Nick said.

Gibbs glowered.

Hetty's glasses hid her eyes, reflecting the white pages on the screen for an instant as she inclined her head with the gravity of a queen. "Thank you, Leon."

"Do what you have to, Henrietta." He turned back to the screens. "Get your people back."

"We will."

"I'm going with you," Gibbs said.

"You're staying right here," Vance over rode him in a sharp tone. "You have other cases besides your current obsession. I think Hetty knows how to run an interrogation." Ellie knew Gibbs would be a bitch to work with the rest of the day.

Light flared through MTAC briefly as Deeks held the door for Hetty. Ellie sat back. There were currents and undercurrents there that she couldn't make sense of. Despite sitting in the center of NCIS intelligence network, where they should have known everything, she felt like they were missing everything critical.
Chapter 22

Deeks

"Not who I was expecting," Sheppard drawled as Marty pushed past the guard opening the cell door for him. They were in holding rather than interrogation, for which he was grateful. It meant Sheppard wasn't in shackles or manacled to a steel table bolted into concrete. Sheppard was sprawled languidly on the cell's spartan cot, the picture of relaxation.

Marty didn't buy that for a minute.

"On your feet," he ordered.

"Not that I'm complaining."

Sheppard unfolded himself from the cot and stood slowly. His hazel eyes were bright and calculating. Marty could see him running the numbers on an escape attempt. His hair was an unruly mess, all spiky cowlicks, and he needed a shave badly. Like everyone held longer than overnight, he'd been stripped of his own clothes and given a jumpsuit. High-risk red in Sheppard's case and it was no doubt warranted. Even the baggy prisoner's garment couldn't conceal the graceful way he moved. Marty was reminded of Sam, oddly. The way Sheppard moved gave away how well his body was trained.

Sheppard looked all right, at least. No bruises, no stiffness. No one had made it physical so far. That made Marty feel better, for Sheppard, McKay, himself and for NCIS. There were lines they wouldn't cross.

Or hadn't yet, at least.

Marty waited until the cell door was closed and locked behind him before tonguing the hard candy he had tucked between his teeth and his cheek to the front of his mouth. He'd sucked most of the candy coating off the thin shell shielding the locator beacon Zelenka and Novak had put together. Dushka had provided the peppermint coating and cellophane that disguised it.

He and Hetty had both been searched after turning over their service weapons along with the knife he always carried. Hetty had piled two knives, an EpiPen that delivered poison, a garrote, and a set of lock-picks hidden in a tampon on the counter. The guards hadn't even known to check the tampon; Hetty had to show them. Marty did, but only because she'd given a similar one to Kensi for Christmas and she'd shown it to him.

Hetty opened her purse for the guards to go through. She pulled out an open bag of hard peppermints, opened one and tucked it between her lips.

"I know you haven't eaten yet, Mr. Deeks. This will keep your blood sugar up until we can take care of that," she'd said and offered him one. Marty took the bag and extracted the candy hiding the locator, then offered the rest to the guards. "Want some?"

He crunched his teeth through the shell, then spit the entire thing into his palm with a cough. They were on camera after all. His fingernail found the groove in the side. He pressed to activate the signal.

"Wave bye-bye," he advised Sheppard as the incandescent light of the Asgard beam encompassed
them both.

Whoever was operating the beam delivered them to the bridge of Revenge. Hetty and McKay were already there.

Vala let go of McKay to latch onto Sheppard, giving him a kiss that was more than friendly.

McKay turned to one of the bridge crew. "They had our communicators. They'll have self-destructed when they were tampered with, but I don't want them left. Trace the naquadah signatures – "

"Already done, Meredith," Zelenka said.

"Then beam them up."

"Of course."

Vala let go of Sheppard finally and he went straight to the pilot's station. She turned to Hetty and Marty and smiled warmly at them.

"We're preparing to leave in forty-eight hours. If you'd like to say good-bye to your friends, we'll be sending them back shortly."

"You are free to return with them if you like," Teyla added. She placed her hand on Marty's arm, pressed gently, then stepped back. "I hope you'll stay with us, though."

"I wouldn't advise going back," McKay said. He plucked at the fabric of his jumpsuit. "I suppose there's not a chance I'll convince Jeannie to come with us after disappearing again."

"You tried. She's already made up her mind, though. I could tell," Jehan told him softly.

McKay made a face, but nodded. "I'll try again. I'll talk to the damned English teacher if I have to. And if that doesn't work – "

"We'll grab them," Ronon said.

"I can't believe I'm thinking about kidnapping my sister and her family," McKay muttered.

"Sucks, man," Marty told him sincerely. He didn't approve of the snatch-and-grab plan, but did it count if it was meant to be a rescue? Should he have tried to convince Kensi and Callen and Sam to come? To bring Sam's kids? Then there was Eric and Nell, Hidoko, Bates at LAPD, Matt Bernhardt, Talia Del Campo at DEA, didn't all of them, and everyone they knew, deserve a rescue too? He didn't know. They were all adults, all capable of making the call for themselves, but… they didn't have all the information.

But McKay's sister did, so… He didn't know.

"No kidnapping," Jehan declared.

McKay looked at him then nodded.

Marty felt inexplicably relieved.

"I have made my decision already," Hetty said. "My estate has been settled and my resignation was filed with HR and a copy sent to both Leon and the Secretary of the Navy."
"We beamed up everything from the designated location," Zelenka told her. "It will be kept in buffer storage though, until we reach Atlantis, for mass and volume efficiency. I'm afraid you'll need to get by with ship's stores until then."

"Quite all right," Hetty replied. "I'm well able to make do, and given a sewing kit I am proficient at alterations."

Teyla smiled at her. "Don't worry, we have things that will fit you. My own people, with a few exceptions, are not so tall as the Tau'ri or Satedans."

"Deeks," Sheppard said. He didn't look up from his station's monitor. "Thanks. Someone will get you to your new quarters."

"You'll be in a crew section," Zelenka said. "We're full up, so you'll be sharing." He turned over his station to someone Marty didn't know by name. "Come, I will show you and Ms. Lange down ship and get you both a crew kit. Once you are in the system, we'd appreciate if you could lend a hand wrangling the Atlantis recruits. Most have good sense, but some have brought family. Some have children."

Zelenka enunciated the last word with a shudder that made Marty smile to himself.

It turned out Marty was going to be sharing a cabin with Hetty. By the time they both had all their crew issue, he was too tired to be weirded out. He was carrying almost everything, so Hetty was the one to tap in the code of their quarters.

A familiar, excited whine sounded as soon as the hatch cycled open. Along with the sound came the smell of dog pee.

"Oh dear," Hetty said. Monty divided himself between excitedly greeting Marty and his approval of Hetty as well.

"I'll clean it up," Marty promised, already trying to figure out how Monty's needs could be handled on ship. He'd figure something out.

Vala had promised they would get his stuff and Monty, but Marty had worried it might not be possible. They’d done it, though, and he figured he and Hetty (and Monty!) would be all right.

He off-loaded their gear onto a bunk and knelt to ruffle Monty's ears. "Hey, yeah, I missed you too," he told the dog, happily giving him attention until Monty was calm enough Marty could clean up his 'accident'.

It turned out Monty wasn't the only pet coming with them. Leashed exercise was permitted in the corridors and cleaning up after them was the owner's responsibility. Anyone who didn't take care of the biologicals would be subject to penalties and the animal put in the Wraith buffers. There were plans to set up a larger, communal exercise area in the F302 bay once they were in hyperspace.

In the meantime, the ship’s crew were busy. They'd shifted from the clandestine operations meant to remain unnoticed and anonymous to overt action. Their computer and information experts were plundering the Internet and protected databases in addition to dumping money into the accounts of businesses all over the world whose warehouses and other holdings they were raiding.

_ Revenge_ was packed, cargo holds and buffers both. _Tempestas_ was shifting materials from itself farther out to _Aurora_, distributing everything so losing one ship wouldn't mean losing all of anything.
After taking Monty for a walk that involved flattening himself to the side of a corridor uncomfortably often, Marty had returned to their cabin and left Monty with water, a bowl of dry food and some absorbent pads that were probably meant for packing. He and Hetty bid their good-byes to Callen, Sam and Kensi before they were sent back.

Filan-ban had a sense of humor; she sent them down to the outskirts of Des Moines, Iowa. Marty was grateful. Thinking about the Dead Milkmen and how peeved Sam would be to end up in Iowa helped him control the way his eyes were watering.

His stomach set up an insistent gurgle.

Being incurably curious, once he'd got a sandwich or three from the mess, he'd headed for the bridge. To sweeten his presence he'd brought mugs, a thermos of coffee, and more sandwiches for McKay and Sheppard.

Hetty was already there.

Sheppard and McKay had shed the prison jumpsuits for typical crew wear sometime during the last hour. Marty thought it had only been an hour, despite how much seemed to be going on all at once.

He handed off the food and drinks. "I thought you might be hungry," he told Sheppard. "Dushka said neither of you had been to the mess yet."

Sheppard just nodded, intent on whatever he was doing. McKay guzzled his first mug so fast Marty worried he'd choke, then held it out in silent demand for more. Zelenka sniggered and told Marty, "You have made a friend for life. You will be sorry."

"Never mind Zelenka, he's a small, petty man," McKay said, "who thinks in small, petty ways."

"You want to steal the Bodleian."


"Is insane," Zelenka confided to Marty.

Hetty had joined them. "Could you really steal library books, Dr. McKay?"

He flapped his hand. "With the Asgard beam. It would be considerably easier than living organics, you realize. Books are stable media."

He glanced up at Hetty and said, "The first thing the Ori will do is demand they burn them, you know. All the books, all the history, all the knowledge that could result in anyone questioning them. It will go."

"Steal the Library of Congress, Mer," Sheppard called. "It's not like they let the public access the books and Congress critters and Senators aren't usually big readers."

"Aurora has the buffer space."

"Yeah," Marty said, "but stealing library books. It seems so low." Not to mention un-pirate-like.

"Contact!" Signe shouted. The main screen went from scrolling inventory lists to a real-time combat display. "Contact is identified as a ha'tak. Approaching Earth at full speed."

"Battle stations," Vala snapped. "Shields."
The bridge crew didn't scramble but they went from busy to fiercely intent, buckling themselves into their seats in some cases.

An alarm started screaming and Filan-ban slapped a button, dialing the volume back on the bridge. They spoke ship wide. "Battle stations, battle stations. Anyone not crew, remain in place."

"They're launching death gliders."

"Scramble the 302s." Vala watched the screen showing the ha'tak and the swarm of smaller orange dots that symbolized the death gliders. "Put me through to Kusanagi and Aurora."

Parallel screens on each side of the main display resolved into video of the bridges of the two Alteran warships.

"They're targeting Revenge and Tempestas as well as Earth's ships," Aurora's captain reported.

"They don't know you're there. Stay cloaked, but move in closer," Vala instructed. "Don't give away your position until I give the order."

"I assume Tempestas is free to fire on anything firing on us?" Kusanagi asked.

"Don't waste any of the drones unless you have to."

"Energy weapons it is." Kusanagi seemed so quiet and sweet even though she'd been the one to stun Marty and his team, but now he saw a cheerfully bloodthirsty facet he'd never guessed she had.

"Five minutes until the death gliders are in range of our weapons," Jehan reported. "Six until they're in range of us."

"Get me a contact with Daedalus and the other ship and the SGC," Vala instructed. "Their sensors aren't as good as ours."

"Going to give them a heads up?"

"Wouldn't want them to think we're shooting at them when we launch," Zelenka said.

"Four warships in orbit – that they know of - and a functional Ancient outpost on planet," McKay said. "Are these Goa'uld crazy?"

"Maybe they've been sitting out there smoking up too much kiva," Signe suggested.

"Maybe they think we don't have a pilot or our engineer," Haemi commented.

"So, it's the Trust?" Zelenka said thoughtfully.

"Too stupid to be Ba'al," Jehan agreed.

The bridge doors opened, and more crew poured in. Teyla was among them, along with Til, Haemi and Ronon. They were geared up and practically humming with excess adrenaline. Two women, one with her arm in a sling, followed them onto the bridge, looking less than certain of their welcome. He blinked in shock when he recognized the second woman as Jennifer Kim.

"If that's a Goa'uld ship, Jack would appreciate knowing," the one with the sling remarked. She had on well-fitting fatigues in urban camo. All the insignia had been stripped off, but Marty could see where officer's tabs and unit patches had been.
"Well, he's not answering, and neither is the SGC or Apollo," Filan-ban snapped before anyone could say anything.

"Colonel Mann," Vala greeted her before switching her attention back to the screens. Mann and Kim gravitated to where Hetty and Marty were staying out of the way. He wasn't leaving the bridge until someone threw him off.

"Ms. Kim, Colonel Mann," Hetty greeted them. Marty wasn't surprised that she knew them both. He sometimes thought Hetty knew everything and possibly was secretly God having them all on.

"I don't like that they can't get through to Jack," Mann said. "That's bad."

Hetty hummed. Kim looked around the bridge. "Are we at war? Who with? Why is that ship getting ready to fire on us?"

"Something's gone very wrong on the ground," Mann answered.

"Launch," Vala directed.

"Launching, launching, launching," echoed from throughout the ship. Marty couldn't detect any 'feel' from the action, though.

Filan-ban's voice was a steady drone, hailing anyone who would answer. Which appeared to be no one.

The symbols showing the two Earth warships suddenly changed direction. Daedalus drifted off its orbital path into one that looked like it would decay into the atmosphere fast. Apollo practically jerked then lifted out of its orbit.

"Apollo is powering its weapons," Signe reported calmly. "They've painted Tempestas with a targeting laser."

"Kusanagi," Vala said.

"Shields are up. Eighty-seven point three nine percent. They'll hold."

"Weapons free, Tempestas."

"Weapons free," Kusanagi repeated. "Thank you, Revenge."
Chapter 23

Jack

Jack stared into the business end of Dave Telford's handgun and thought that this was the problem with agents who did long term deep cover work: sometimes they turned. They spent so much time pretending to be bad guys it stopped being pretend. They lost themselves. Or sold out because the bad guy life offered all the goodies they really wanted and their morals or ethics or whatever had sent them undercover in the first place just weren't enough to outweigh greed.

Everything – too late, too little, too easy – made sense now. Hartgans, the frame-up on Daniel, the London incident and the White House attempt as been chaff. Great if it worked but meant to focus attention away from the real plan and the more useful mole. Colonel David Telford, new chief of Security at Area 51, slotting nicely into the space left behind by the kidnapping and murder of Louis Young. Young's old friend, there at the promotion ceremony getting his insignia pinned on in reward for a job well done, back from the wars, back from the Lucian Alliance, you did good, Dave -

How easy it had been for Telford to talk with Young, find out where he was going after he was briefed in on his new assignment. Not asking about the assignment or where Young would be, just chit-chat, got a buddy at Pax River, promised he'd show me his rebuilt Mustang.

Easy-peasy pudding pie for a guy who survived five years undercover inside the Lucian Alliance.

Of course, it was easy when you sold out to the guys you were infiltrating. There wasn't a single report Dave Telford had sent back that wouldn't have to be re-analyzed for disinformation. Jack's ulcer burned, or maybe it was his heart, thinking of the lives they'd likely lost to bad intel from one trusted man.

They'd missed it. They'd never even suspected Telford. The guilt would eat at him at night when he tried to sleep, along with all his other dead.

Hetty had been the best at spotting doubles, recognizing the ones feeding garbage in so they'd get garbage out. Jack had always thought he wasn't bad at it; he was naturally suspicious. He'd never met a good thing he didn't question. If he had a motto, it was 'what's the catch?'

But he'd been gone from the Mountain, swimming with the great whites in DC, when Dave Telford was being run, and Hank Landry never met a good thing that he didn't look for a way to take credit for it. He probably didn't even know what a triple agent did, never mind believe the Lucians were that sophisticated.

Jack hadn't either, but he would have – should have – taken a second look at Telford.

Jesus Christ on a pogo stick, what was going on at the Mountain?

He had Mitchell, Teal'c, Daniel and Jonas with him right now, the only ones Jack really and truly trusted, as well as Barrett in tow. The NID agent was wrung out from Thor’s Hammer and was only one-handed. He wouldn't be good for much more than a distraction.

Jack had arrived with SG-1 at Area 51 thanks to Caldwell – at least Daedalus was still on the right side, but for how long when they'd snaked Ellis on Apollo? – and walked them right into a god
damn ambush. Security had surrounded them on Telford's orders. 

Then the bastards had shot the two SFs who weren't compromised. 

Jack was only half-surprised Telford and his Lucian Alliance goons and traitors hadn't shot SG-1. Apparently after all that time as a triple agent, it seemed that Telford needed an audience for the big reveal. He needed someone to know how he'd fooled them all. He needed to gloat. 

Didn't even need a snake in his head when he had the soul of one. 

SG-1 were hogtied and on their knees and Jack was tied into a chair. Not even a comfortable chair, though that might have been because of the position he was forced into by the ropes. 

Telford had already backhanded Jack once. His mouth tasted of blood thanks to cutting the inside of his cheek on his own teeth, one of which felt loose when Jack tongued at it. Wonderful, another damn visit to the dentist. He'd been hit in the face so often over the years it was a miracle he still had any of his own teeth. 

He mustered up some saliva to go with the blood. 

Telford tapped the muzzle of his pistol against Jack's forehead. Jack refused to cross his eyes trying to focus on it. He could smell gun oil. Telford had cleaned his weapon recently. Hell, Telford's hand was so close Jack could smell the remnants of institutional hand soap. Area 51 used the same hypoallergenic stuff used at the Mountain. No one wanted to mistake a reaction to some alien contaminant with an allergic irritation from cheap soap. Jack had had to explain that line item on the budget to a GAO inspector, while avoiding the word alien. 

He contemplated whether he could lean his head forward enough to bite one of Telford's fingers. Regretfully, he realized it wouldn't work. 

"Well, go ahead," he snapped at Telford. "You've got the big bad guy monologue over. What do you want?" 

"You, begging, to begin with."

"Bzzzt, not happening, asshole," Jack replied. "But it's good to dream big."

"You'll beg for their lives," Telford said. He aimed the pistol at Teal'c. "I can put one through the tattoo on his forehead if you don't."

Jack winced inside imagining it. The .45 Telford carried would punch through and blow out the back of Teal'c's skull. It wouldn't be a difficult shot, unless Teal'c moved at the last instant, and it would still be fatal even without a bullseye. 

"O'Neill would not dishonor me or himself in such a fashion," Teal'c stated.

Telford sneered. "Jaffa."

He shifted his aim to Daniel, who sighed and asked, "Really? I've already died twice. It's getting boring."

Telford got closer with Jonas. He pressed the muzzle to Jonas' temple. "What about you?"

Jonas set his jaw, glared up at Telford, and leaned in, no words wasted. 

"Don't bother," Mitchell said before Telford could threaten him. "I meant my oath when I made it
to protect my country and my world from assholes exactly like you. Even if it meant dying. Go fuck yourself."

Jack squeezed his eyes shut for a second. He had never been any prouder of SG-1 in any of its incarnations. They were the best. They were why he hadn't pulled the plug and gone fishing while the world burned long ago.

"You think you're getting out of this?" Telford demanded. He didn't bother to threaten Barrett. Not that Barrett hadn't done well. Getting snaked wasn't his fault.

"Maybe not," Jack said, "but you won't either."

"We have Apollo. The Pegasans won't interfere, not after your government had their people kidnapped and held hostage."

Jack grimaced. The Lucians' plans to sow discord between the Tau'ri and the Pegasans might be successful unless Hetty and Deeks had succeeded in springing Sheppard and McKay. Even if they had, Vala Mal Doran had no reason to come to their rescue. Her people with this clusterfuck. He guessed that by now, they'd gotten most if not all of what they came to Earth to get even if the trade agreements had fallen through. Couldn't blame them for doing an end-run under the circumstances, either.

"Give me the codes to the vaults where the Dargol chemical is kept!" Telford demanded.

Jack hawked a loogie of spit and blood into Telford's face. He managed get some in Telford's eye.

Telford drew back and pulled himself together. Jack had been hoping he'd lose his temper and get careless. Teal'c was working on his bindings. He could see the fabric of his fatigues stretch over straining muscles. Jonas was rocking and wriggling like he either had to pee or was trying to reach something in one of his boot tops. Boot knife probably; good for him. Jack didn't want Telford paying any attention to SG-1.

Even if he did, though, even if Telford went over to them and put a bullet between their eyes one by one, Jack couldn't say anything. He couldn't... because SG-1, Barrett, and Jack himself were nothing compared to the people who would suffer and die if Telford got at the contents of Area 51's special vaults. Everything everyone in the SGC had fought so long against would come to pass. SG-1 knew the score; they had each in their way made it clear.

If the Lucian Alliance along with the Trust - in whatever enemy of my enemy partnership they'd put together - succeeded, it would only be a matter of time until the Goa'uld were back in control. A coalition of drug dealers, slavers, and raiders, along with greediest scum Earth had to offer, would not be able to hold against a species that once ruled most of the known galaxy.

But even resurgent Goa'uld weren't the worst threat. Humans had rebelled and beat them before. They'd chased Ra off Earth. The SGC, with a lot of luck and some help here and there, had broken the System Lords.

No, the problem was that even at the height of their power, the System Lords couldn't have stood against the Ori. Because while they pretended to be gods to their slaves, the Ori and their Priors could deliver 'miracles'. Whatever forces the 'alliance' of third-string Goa'uld, interstellar criminals, and Tau'ri morons could muster, it would fold like a house of cards against the Ori.

Earth would burn.

Jack closed his eyes briefly once more, just to brace himself. Then he opened them, because
whatever Telford did to his people, Jack would make himself watch. He wouldn't talk, but he'd bear witness.

He was so tired, though.

Telford started with beating Mitchell.

Hours later, he paused because Mitchell had passed out. Telford was no Ba'al, but then he didn't have a sarcophagus to throw his victim into if he got too enthusiastic. Jack had gritted his teeth so hard he thought he'd cracked one to go with one knocked loose by Telford earlier.

Telford had worked up a sweat. He left Mitchell curled on his side, breathing wetly – but breathing, Jack reassured himself, still breathing – and went to the conference room side table where someone had set up a lunch buffet. Telford opened a bottle of water, took a drink, then spilled some onto a napkin and used it to methodically wipe Mitchell's blood from his fingers.

Jack knew there would still be blood under his nails and his cuticles. Blood was stubborn.

Telford's thugs were watching him with nervous fascination. They were thugs even if they wore the uniform of the US Air Force, because they'd betrayed that uniform however he'd suborned them.

He was a little comforted that there were only four of the thugs. No snakes in their heads telling them what to do. Plain human, no Jaffa. Despite their military culture, Jaffa were terrible at faking being human soldiers, even if you ignored the forehead tattoos and primita pouches. Their sense of humor didn't synch up with the pop culture cynicism that predominated in the West. Even in less oblivious places on Earth people still sensed something off about them.

Mitchell was making high, whistling noises on his exhales. It was distracting. He was curled up in a fetal position, one shoulder dipping down -

Jack did his part by chuckling. "You know – " he upped the Minnesota in his voice, " – a ten-year-old from Gary, Indiana could do worse than that. I mean. He's SG-1. You have to work to impress us."

"You think you're too tough to break?" Telford snarled. Jack realized he had hit a raw spot. The Lucians must have found him out and taken him apart. Now he had to re-enact that on the people he imagined would judge him for it.

"Maybe not," Jack drawled, "but it'll take a hell of lot longer than it took you."

"You sonovabitch – " Telford started toward Jack.

Mitchell finished bringing the rope and his tied-together hands around his feet to his front. Jonas lunged forward, his own bindings already cut, and slashed Mitchell's hands and feet free. Teal'c surged to his feet with a shout, bursting free of the ropes holding him with sheer strength. Daniel, still tied up, threw himself into the legs of the two SFs who jumped forward first, tangling them so they all went down.

Jonas pounced and shoved his knife deep in the neck of the nearest SF. Mitchell scrambled across the floor and grabbed the man's fallen weapon, brought it up and shot the nearest SF still on his feet. Teal'c reached the last man and cracked his spine, then dropped him, limp as a mouse a cat had finished with.

That left Telford.
He had his pistol in one hand, a vo'cume in the other, and a rictus smile.

"Kree!" he shouted. "Attack, I repeat, attack now!"
Chapter 24

Jehan

It was so good to be back on Revenge and in the pilot's seat. He could hear Mer muttering to himself at the engineering station and could glimpse Zelenka's flyaway hair in the periphery of his vision. He could feel Mer and Vala, but the naquadah signature was comforting for once.

Once they left Earth orbit he was never coming back.

But first they had to deal with the ha'tak and Apollo.

They had their 302s, along with a few gateships from Tempestas. They'd were engaging with Apollo's squadron. They'd left most of them gateships behind with Atlantis, where individuals who had taken the ATA therapy were learning piloting beyond thinking go and stop at the little ships. The 302s couldn't fit through a stargate, so they'd kept all they had left with the ships.

Revenge had the best crew in two galaxies, but the 302 pilots weren't trained or experienced as the Tau'ri pilots. They were taking a beating. They'd faced off against Wraith darts a few times, never against death gliders or other F302s. Apollo's 302 pilots would be among the best Earth could muster. It was an unfair fight.

There were still the death gliders coming, too.

He re-oriented Revenge without shifting her orbit to create the longest and widest firing window for the railguns, which would outstrip the 302s.

"Fire," Vala commanded.

Jehan corrected Revenge's course for the subtle displacement as the railguns hammered the incoming death gliders. Tempestas was maneuvering. Slower than Revenge, because while Miko was a natural with the ATA and Lindsay was as talented in the engine room as Mer, they weren't military trained, and they had to run all their numbers while Jehan did all his calculations in his head. He wasn't faster than the computers, but he was faster than the input and output.

Someone had been running drills on the Alteran ship though, perhaps even drills for something like the Tau'ri ships turning on them, because Tempestas stayed just beyond Apollo's range where its shields could shrug off the hits with little loss of power.

The death gliders were scattering, evading Revenge's fighter ships' railguns, and arcing down toward the planet.

Daedalus' plunge into the gravity well leveled off and it began to climb to the top of the atmosphere, superheated air flaming incandescent over its shields. Its pilot wasn't bothering with stealth. Daedalus was at full military power, redlining its power plants for every erg they could provide. Whoever was at the controls was damned good; they were getting everything from Daedalus it had, but the wax wasn't going to melt from its wings.

Miko was taking her time before firing. Maybe she was reluctant to fire on Apollo. More likely she was setting up the perfect firing solution for a one-and-done.

One of the comm screens flickered to video. Daedalus. The camera showed the interior of its bridge. One of the monitors there was black with a hole in the glass, keyboard at the station below
sparking. Caldwell had a shiner starting to color but looked all right otherwise.

"Revenge, Tempestas, this is Colonel Caldwell aboard Daedalus. My crew and I have reasserted command after a mutiny by agents of the Trust placed aboard in the last few weeks. It appears the same tactic has succeeded aboard Apollo."

"So?" Vala challenged.

Caldwell winced. "I'm asking you to let us take care of our sister ship."

"You'll shoot it down?"

"If I have to."

Signe said calmly, "Daedalus has powered up its guns. It is targeting Apollo."

"We reserve the right to defend ourselves, but won't interfere," Vala said.

"Good. I must talk to Apollo now. Caldwell, out." The screen darkened.

"If the ship must be destroyed, it will be better for future relations if we aren't the ones to do it," Teyla said.

She was right. Even if Apollo shot first, the governments of Earth would never forgive them.

Jehan didn't care about that anymore, though.

"I want to hear what Caldwell's saying to them," Vala ordered.

They listened as Caldwell spoke to the captain of Apollo, speaking rationally and with due authority, pointing out that the death gliders, still pursued by Revenge's fighters, were entering Earth's atmosphere and were the true threat; that Apollo and Daedalus had both failed their first responsibility to stop the attack already, and that starting a war with an ally would only make matters worse. Everyone jerked as Apollo's captain answered with the telltale reverb of a Goa'uld. It laughed and commanded its crew to shoot down Daedalus and the Pegasan ships.

"Typical Goa'uld," Signe commented, "in love with its own voice and too stupid to count."

Apollo didn't fire, though. Instead they heard the Goa'uld screech in fury as sounds of fighting erupted from the ship's bridge.

"Guess they figured snaking the captain would be enough to control the ship," Mer commented.

"I am your god, you will obey me!" the Goa'uld shouted and everyone chuckled a moment later at the sound of a zat firing.

Apollo drifted course-less for than a moment then changed its vector. Its remaining 302s changed course too, diving into the atmosphere to play catch up with the death gliders. Its targeting lasers reached out to paint the ha'tak.

"I think the right side won," Zelenka commented.

The comm screen feed from Apollo came to life. Its bridge had taken a worse beating than Daedalus' had. There were bodies, and medics laboring over wounded. It was a grim sight.

A young officer with the fierce dark eyes of a Mongol warrior in a face that reflected a mix of
ethnicities stepped into camera focus. He had lieutenant's pips on his uniform jumpsuit and a sloppy bandage on one arm. A incongruous Texas drawl wide as the Rio Grande slowed his words when he spoke.

"This is Lieutenant Garamendi in command aboard Apollo. Colonel Ellis has been relieved of duty and restrained due to – " he made a face, ” – being a Goa'uld. Majors Dubois and Ebersole are dead, and Major Williams, Major Dent, Lieutenants Carnegie, and Gillis and Bleekley have all been arrested. I'm assuming temporary command until the SGC can assign someone to replace them. We have some wounded and our life support has been sabotaged. I'd appreciate any help anyone can give against the ha'tak and the death gliders."

Vala leaned forward. "Do you need to evacuate the ship?"

"Ma'am, I believe we can make repairs before we run out of air, but not and go after that ha'tak too."

Vala's toothy grin told how she wouldn't mind doing that at all. "Our pleasure," she purred.

Caldwell lit up another monitor. "Lieutenant, if you need technicians or equipment, Daedalus stands prepared to lend you aid. Our medical bay is at the ready as well, if your wounded exceed your capacity."

"Appreciated, sir. Most of the fighting was confined to zats, so we have people recovering from stun or never recovering," Garamendi replied. "Most of our wounded are a result of the bomb in life support. Sir, I'd advise you to double check for explosives – it looked like the bomb was built into Apollo's systems."

Jehan tuned out the back-and-forth between the Tau'ri ships. He had a ha'tak to help kill.
Mitchell shot Telford about a half second after he got his order out. Still tied to his chair, Jack summed up the situation in two words.

"Well, fuck."

"Can someone get me untied?" Daniel asked plaintively from the floor.

Jonas went to cut Daniel loose. Teal'c dealt with Jack's bindings. Mitchell stayed on the floor, still clutching his confiscated weapon, and wheezing in a worrying fashion.

"We'll get you to a doctor as fast as we can," Jack said once he was on his feet.

Jonas was steadying Daniel who was swaying and stamping his feet to get his circulation back. "Good job, space monkey. All of you."

Jack armed himself, as did Jonas, Teal'c and even Daniel – who was a better shot than anyone gave him credit for so long as he had his glasses. Daniel was always SG-1's secret weapon. No one ever accounted him a physical threat until it was too late.

The gunshots brought security busting in. The lieutenant in charge took one look at the dead bodies and the ropes still dangling from Jack's wrists and let out a curse. "That's General O'Neill, if you shoot him we're all going to be inspecting sewage tunnels the rest of our lives."

Jack grimaced at his wrists – there was blood seeping from under the ropes – and went over to Telford. The inevitable reek from the bodies was already filling the room. He crouched next to Telford despite the odor and picked up the vo'cume Telford had used. His knees protested going down and up.

"I need a technician with Goa'uld expertise and the direct line to the Mountain," he told the kid lieutenant. "Telford used this to tell someone to attack, so this place needs to be locked down and on emergency alert."

"Colonel Mitchell is in need of medical attention," Teal'c said.

"That too."

Jack paused and considered the fallen SFs and Telford. None of them made his naquadah Spidey
sense ping, but the Trust had had those cloned Goa'uld bred here on Earth that didn't carry the heavy metal in their systems. Better safe than sorry.

"Three people with everybody, never alone with one of the bodies, and they all get X-rayed for symbiotes," he ordered. In fact, everyone was getting checked before Jack lifted the lockdown, including himself and SG-1.

The lieutenant's eyes widened but he nodded and began barking out orders to his men and then into a handheld radio. Jack made a note of his name. Any officer who could keep his shit together under the circumstances would do well on a gate team.

They entered the base communications center to the scream of sirens and a panicky tech yelling the Goa'uld were attacking. Jack didn't smack him, that was not how a general acted (or any good officer), but he did shift him out of his seat and have someone else take over. The new guy, Roanhorse, was calm the way Teal'c was calm, conveying a promise of leashed strength, and provided a steady recital of their situation in less than a minute.

It wasn't great.

Incoming death gliders were targeting DC, Moscow, the Mountain, Antarctica, and Area 51. The Snakeskinners were grounded, a deliberately introduced computer virus had disabled their fly-by-wire systems. Jack decided to be grateful it knocked the Groom Lake 302s out before they could take off. No one would die because their aircraft decided to be a brick in an aerial dogfight.

A terse conversation with Hank Landry confirmed their star suspect as mole had done his share of damage there too. The SGC was on lockdown, but the Bill Lee had managed to shut down the gate and freeze the iris in closed position after Hartgans tried to sabotage it. Any gate teams out there in trouble would be in the shit, but they knew to divert to the Alpha Base if their IDCs didn't get a radio ping back within the first five seconds.

Plenty long enough to die in a firefight, but Hank reminded Jack they couldn't dial in if the Lucians had the gate open into the Mountain anyway. They just had to hope luck and training were on the side of the teams out there.

Jack briefed Hank in on Telford and the Lucian Alliance-Trust merge. It was the Trust who provided the moles who could fool the SGC. It was probably Telford's undercover work that gave the Lucians the idea, though. Strange the things that come around to bite you on the ass sometimes.

The situation only appeared grimmer with the information coming in. *Daedalus* and *Apollo* both had infiltrators aboard; Ellis was snaked the way Telford had said. *Apollo* 's crew hadn't reacted well when they realized their captain was a Goa'uld; the fighting had been nasty. The ship was currently out of the fight and Ellis would be lucky if he lived long enough to reach Thor's Hammer.

The Lucian plan to foment a shooting war between Earth and the Pegasans had failed, though. Hetty and Detective Deeks had retrieved Sheppard and McKay. Vala Mal Doran was a canny woman, not too quick on the trigger. She'd waited until the situation revealed itself before going after the ha'tak.

*Revenge* and *Tempestas* were handling the ha'tak, keeping it out of range of Earth and its vulnerable population. Jack knew playing keep away was harder than simply destroying the ha'tak, but that would result in it crashing through the atmosphere and killing a lot of innocent people. Not to mention the naquadah contamination of wherever it impacted. No would thank her or her crews for it, but Jack wouldn't forget.
As good as they were doing against the ha’tak, Revenge and Tempestas didn't have much in the way of rider ships. Three or four gateships and a dozen 302s that dated back to when Revenge had still been Prometheus. They'd thinned the death gliders, but not enough; too many had made it past them while they were tied up in one-on-one dogfights with Apollo's fighters.

Jack looked at the radar screen and winced. "Daniel, get over here, I might need you to translate."

"Translate what, Jack?" Daniel asked as he limped over.

Jack had the old-fashioned handset of the phone in his hand. He picked out the number he'd memorized at some point, with no intention or desire to ever need it. His Polish had always been better than his Russian and both were half-forgotten these days.

"Russian," he gritted out and hoped Chekov would pick up.

Three rings and Chekov, or someone, did answer with a cautious, "Da?"

"It's O'Neill, with Homeworld," Jack said. Daniel leaned in cheek to cheek with him and repeated his words in Russian.

"Jack!"

"Have you got eyes on the sky?" Jack asked.

"Da, we see. We have launched fighters over Moscow. Why have you not – "

"They're grounded, the crews of Apollo and Daedalus are compromised, and our Pegasan friends are already doing all they can." Jack hesitated, then bit the bullet. "If you've got anything else, we could sure use some help."

Chekov laughed humorlessly.

"Where are you?"

"Area 51 and that looks like where the attack is going to hit first," Jack told him. "We'll hold on the ground as long as we can." Maybe Caldwell could clear his pilots and dispatch them. Maybe some genius could debug the Snakeskinners equipment. Maybe pigs would fly and shit the death gliders from the sky. The Air Force and Marines were scrambling everything they could put into the air, but Jack knew how badly most Earth fighters performed against death gliders. They weren't even fast enough to ram them.

Chekov sighed. "It will probably cost me my career, but Earth cannot afford to lose what you have buried in the desert, O'Neill. I will send you my Space Witches."

"You can stand next to me when they strip me of my rank," Jack said. "Spasibo."

He cut the connection and turned to Roanhorse. "Let NORAD know we're getting reinforcements from the Russians. Don't try to shoot the ladies down. They're on our side."

The Russian Stargate program was even more secretive than the SGC. Leaching top pilots from the Russian armed forces without drawing attention had resulted in the program being nearly exclusively staffed by women officers. The Space Witches were named in honor of the female Russian pilots who had been the terror of the Germans in World War II. They were over-qualified, seldom missed, and immensely dedicated. A squadron of them would be defending Moscow's air space.
Chekov was sending Jack the other squadron. They were the best Russia had and Jack was grateful Chekov hadn't made him beg.

Of course, that was because they were in deep shit.

The whole complex shook as the first salvo from the death gliders hit. Dust sprang from crevices and hung in the air, tinted crimson bright by the emergency lighting.

**Galina Tolineva**

Major Galina Tolineva had been through the Stargate on more than one occasion. She'd been the sole survivor of her team on a mission that SG-1 finished. She knew that team was a mere shadow of what it had been then: O'Neill was a general now and the immensely irritating but competent McKay had been taken by the Tok'ra. Only Master Teal'c of Chulak and Dr. Jackson remained.

It did not matter. Her own honor coincided with her orders this once. She was coming to their aid, to the United States, to fight against enemies of the world.

She was immensely proud of her command, her 'space witches' as General Chekov had fondly nicknamed them. The Mikoyan-Beriev Project 87 'Mother Bears' they flew were amalgams of Goa'uld and Earth science, the greatest achievement of Russian military avionics designers (and perhaps some blue prints obtained of F-302s) and they were *bitches* to fly. Only the most talented pilots could handle them, but the Mother Bears were tougher than anything the Americans built, equipped with vicious armaments and armor that could shrug off a hit from anything but a point-blank shot from a death glider.

She'd already seen the proof. Lt. Duslova's 87 caught a hit to her tail that sent her and it spiraling down to the desert below until Luba pulled out of it and rejoined the fight.

Masha Berenkov was not so lucky.

Galina was twisting and turning, following a death glider as it turned toward the sprawl of Las Vegas. She was listening for the tone that would tell her she had a target lock and keeping situational awareness of 360° in three dimensions. One part of her mind was monitoring her fuel usage – they'd burned more than she'd wished flying from Archanglsk to Nevada, arching high over Alaska and south over Canada in full stealth mode, flying faster and longer than the 87s had ever before. Only Aleksei'eva's fighter had suffered any problems – she'd been forced to set down at a Canadian Air Force base. The rest of her attention was on the other fighters and death gliders.

She saw Masha silhouette her 87 against the setting sun, probably half unconscious from pulling too many Gs – Mother Bears would kill you if you pushed them hard enough – and blinded by the glare. Galina's own body ached from the punishment she was putting it through. Masha would not live to whine her way through a dogfight hangover. She took her shot at the death glider Galina was pursuing, then her 87 was torn apart in fire and black smoke as the one she'd missed took advantage.

Galina had a moment of wanting to ram the death glider but controlled herself. She re-targeted and used her nose gun to rattle the other pilot, sending him arcing away on a course she could intercept.

The enemy was good, though, and caught on before Galina had a target lock. She fired once, to goose him from turning back into the main dogfight, checked her six, and hit military power to run him down.

The death glider turned southeast and dived low, into the sunset shadow of the mountains west of
Las Vegas. Galina sneered. Did he think she was relying just on her eyes?

She was sweating in her G-suit. She couldn't do anything about it or how slick her hands felt in their gloves. A month ago, she'd been in Siberia, assigned to the same base where Russia conducted its naquadah research – someday her Mother Bear would be powered by a naquadah power plant instead of Jupiter a115 and there would be no worries about running out of fuel – but the cockpit was always hot and so was her flight helmet. Her hair was yanked back in a ruthless braid and like most her female pilots, she'd repurposed a simple hair band into a sweat band that kept perspiration from getting in her eyes.

Ahead of the death glider, Las Vegas glittered, a neon Xanadu alight as the night came down on the American pleasure dome. They would be over it and past in a second. Galina wondered if the pilot would fire on the civilian city –

The answer was yes. The death glider fired on one of the casinos; a black pyramid outlined in neon. Fire gouted from its side.

Galina screamed down into a dive after the death glider as it dropped to maneuver between the towering buildings at the center of the city. No doubt he believed she wouldn't fire for fear of damaging them.

He was right and wrong.

Galina wasn't going to shoot any civilians or buildings.

She was better than that.

She was going to shoot the death glider.

She dodged and jigged between buildings, following the death glider, until they were over a wide boulevard. Instinct told her what the other pilot meant to set up as it turned on its side and began a curving climb. Galina whipped her 87 into a ninety-degree climb, fighting the push of gravity to keep breathing, the tight fit of her G-suit the only thing keeping her conscious as her 87 out-climbed and out-turned the death glider. She spun to face the way she came and dropped down on it as it finished its turn. The pilot had meant catch her running face first into his crosshairs. He was good; she was better.

She stooped like falcon on a fat pigeon.

Her HUD showed her crosshairs lined up on the center of the death glider in perfect silhouette as they both raced above the central avenue. Galina fought a grin; worried the Gs she was still pulling would cut her lips on her teeth. The lock tone sang in her headset.

She squeezed the trigger as smoothly as she would her pistol at the target range.

She was so tight on the death glider's tail debris dashed against the 87 as she streaked through the fireball where the death glider had been.

She did a barrel roll for the hell of it as she streaked back toward the explosions and energy weapons lighting the night sky to the north.

She needed two more confirmed kills to make ace.

Behind her, the remains of the death glider rained down on the Las Vegas Strip.
Gibbs

Gibbs was yelling at Vance, so furious he knew he was spitting on the Director. Vance had authorized Hetty Lange and her pet cop to talk to the prisoners and now they were all gone. *Poof.* Vanished into thin air.

Gibbs didn't buy that. It had to have been set up. He wanted to interrogate the guards from holding—hard. They had to have been ordered to look the other way. Vance was the only one who could have done that.

He'd put up with a lot of political dodgeball over the years. He'd come to an understanding with Vance; the man was ambitious, but not corrupt or careless. He didn't use the Service to prosecute his own vendettas. He stuck to the rules but understood sometimes they had to bent and even spindled.

But someone, somehow, had got to him.

On some level, Gibbs knew he was red-faced and out of control, but the problem was that he *was* out of control. He swept everything, keyboard, monitor, files, off his desk to the floor. He couldn't stop himself ranting, poking Vance in the chest over and over, making a god damn scene. He'd have seen any other agent who acted out the same way fired. Shame finally began to overwhelm his temper.

It was a good thing every agent removed their issue weapon and locked it a desk drawer when they came into the office, otherwise someone might have drawn on him.

He stopped when he saw Reeves standing next to Abby and Torres. Abby had her hands over her mouth. Her eyes were huge above them, glossy with tears that were tracing black snakes of mascara down her cheeks.

Jack Sloane was in the doorway to the conference room, shaking her head, looking sad.

Bishop was on her knees, picking up and sorting the paper files he'd strewn across the bullpen floor.

Reeves and Torres looked one twitch away from tackling him.

Gibbs scanned the rest of the bullpen. Agents ducked below cubicle walls. Others blatantly stared. None of them showed any sympathy; some of them were nearly gleeful, like they were attending live entertainment. Watching Leroy Jethro Gibbs finally implode his career was something many of them had been waiting for a long time.

He breathed in and out. Harsh, sawing breaths. He was too hot. His vision contracted, gray at the margins. He felt almost like he was floating, like the top of his head had come off. It was horrifying. It was the end and he knew it. He was still angry, but the blind fury and all his strength were draining from him. He thought if he moved, he'd stagger and fall, pass out like he had while he was recovering from being shot the last time. He wondered if he was having a stroke or a heart attack. Something that locked up your lungs and made you go insane.

"You done?" Vance asked. He sounded as exhausted as Gibbs suddenly felt.
"Yeah, Leon," he said, "I'm done."

"Good. You're fired. You have until the end of the week to write up your cases and hand them over to the rest of our investigators." Vance narrowed his eyes. "Hand me a letter of resignation before then and you can really retire. Otherwise I will see you terminated for cause and lose your pension."

Gibbs opened his mouth to tell Vance what he could do with his pension and closed it. The air in the bullpen seemed thicker than normal, gelled with the tension suspended in it, sound slowed and blurry.

The ding of the elevator arriving and opening snapped everyone's attention to its doors. McGee strode out and came to halt under the undivided scrutiny. "What's going – "

An air raid siren interrupted McGee.

The spooling wail, loud enough to be heard everywhere in the city, shocked everyone. Most of them were too young to have gone through classroom drills during the Cold War. Half of them came from places in the country that had no hurricanes or tornados to worry about and no clue about taking cover.

The coiling spiral of sound rose and fell and repeated, louder than Gibbs would have imagined, but the speakers were probably close, somewhere in the Navy Yard. The sirens were sounding all over DC, harmonizing though some were out of sync.

The television feeds running on several monitors broke into the steady, annoying squealing buzz of the Emergency Broadcast System. A ribbon running along the top of the video repeated *This is not a drill. Air attack imminent. Take cover. This is not a test. Air attack imminent. Take cover.*

The ZNN talking head blabbering about Canada endangering US lives by taking in Syrian refugees was replaced by static and then the ubiquitous equipment message: *No Signal.* The broadcast had been shut down.

"Is it the Russians?" someone asked.

Gibbs remembered the analyst that morning mentioning the Russians had security in place to take over the radio and television stations. Seemed like the US had too.

"Worry about that later," he said. "Everyone needs to get down to the basement. The morgue may seem morbid, but the refrigeration insulation will provide some protection from radiation." They could seal the building against chemical and biological contaminants too – if they knew in time. Or a bomb didn't crack it like an egg.

Gibbs' heart was hammering double time. This might be it. Everything they'd sweated and bled and fought to keep at bay. He could almost hope that it was a terrorist attack, because even that would be better than World War III.

"Like we're going to survive if we get nuked," someone complained.

"You don't want to fight for a chance, stay here, go up on the roof, I don't care," Gibbs snapped. "More room and better odds for the rest us."

"Move, people," Vance ordered. He'd gone ashen. Of course, he was thinking of his kids.

"Use the stairs!" Gibbs shouted.
The sirens kept cycling. The sound was joined with the thocketing throb of military helicopters hugging the ground to lower their target profile as they flew. Some of them were probably evacuating the President to a more secure site. Some place that wasn't scheduled to be ground zero if the ball went up.

He bent and pulled Bishop to her feet. "Take you weapon," he advised her.

"Do you think it's real?" she asked. "Could it be another screw up like in Hawaii?"

"Got to treat it like the real thing, Bishop, and pray it isn't," he told her.

She firmed her lips and with a nod, got moving.

Vance caught his arm. "Gibbs –"

"I'll get you that letter if we're both alive at the end of the week."

"Go take care of Abby," Vance said. "I'm going to stay here and do a walk through to make sure everyone is where they should be, then lock down the building."

"For god's sake, stay away from the windows." The NCIS headquarters had too much damn glass. Even after it had had a damn bomb go off, they still rebuilt with picture windows and skylights.

The not-so-distant roar of jet engines was joined by the crack of fast movers breaking the sound barrier. Air Force, Marine Corps, and Navy would have everything they could scramble in the air if this was a real attack. If it was an air attack, conventional warfare and not NBCs, they might even do some good. Gibbs looked up through the skylight and glimpsed fighters streaking low, headed east. He silently wished the pilots luck and jogged down to the basement.

"I need to call my girlfriend," someone was whining.

"My kids," Alducci moaned. "My wife's in Philadelphia. I'm supposed to pick them up from school." He grabbed his coat and headed for the elevator.

Torres caught him and said, "Listen, they'll keep them at the school. You go out there, you're going to get caught in gridlock. You need to stay here until we know what's going on. Call them –"

"They're phones are turned off when they're in class."

"Yeah, man, I think they'll turn them on." Torres was shepherding Alducci toward the stairs and keeping an eye on McGee. McGee, who had to be losing his shit inside, desperate to get to Delilah and the twins.

Gibbs wanted to slap himself. No, he wanted someone to punch him. He'd pushed and ordered and flat-out intimidated his team into doing things they had doubts over. Not just with Shepherd and McKay, but for years. He wasn't fool enough to believe Tony left just because of Ziva and Tali. Tony left because Gibbs had crossed some line that Tony considered too far, too much. Hadn't been willing to risk himself for Gibbs any longer when he had a child to consider.

That didn't make Tony a coward. It made him smart and a good parent. Better than Gibbs had been. He was a better investigator too, Gibbs had figured that out when it took Alex, Torres, and Reeves to fill the space Tony left behind.

But had Gibbs learned anything? No. He hadn't. He wouldn't have ordered McGee to hack into classified databases and a hundred other things that could not only end his career but leave him in
prison if he had. Not how you treated your team, but it was more egregious when there was Delilah and two babies involved.

What the hell was wrong with him? When had he lost all sense of proportion?

He didn't know, but suddenly and surely, he knew that it was time for him to retire. He'd spent his entire career at NCIS hiding from the pain of losing Shannon and Kelly in one way or another. He'd been in so much pain when he began that he didn't care who he used or hurt along the way, there was only justice, his concept of justice. In time, he'd mellowed enough to like a few people, to count on them and give them his loyalty, but he'd never lost his conviction that his way was the only right way.

And it wasn't, it wasn't; he'd been doing more harm than good to the very people he considered friends – he'd never even admitted they were friends, it was Ducky and Pride and Mike Franks and Tony who had decided or declared they were friends, each time.

Now it was too late in too many cases.

He left McGee to Torres and Bishop; the three of them had gelled into a damn fine team that really didn't need Gibbs anyway. Balboa was organizing the other team leads, letting them ride herd on their agents, keeping non-agents and any visitors from panicking. Bromfield, that harridan from HR, was doing a head count.

"Reeves," he called. Reeves turned back with a look of inquiry. "We're going down to the garage, getting some plywood and tools so we can cover the windows in Abby's lab."

"Have you any idea what's going on?" Reeves asked as they headed down stairs.

"None," Gibbs admitted. For all they had dug up and investigated, nothing had pointed to national or terrorist threat to DC. He didn't know if they'd dropped the ball or if this had come from so far out of left field no one could have seen it coming.

Maybe this had been why O'Neill was so angry with him. We're one bad decision away from a war. Gibbs grimaced. Had he and NCIS been the reason someone made that decision? Why someone hadn't been stopped?

Too late, now, to listen to O'Neill or Hetty or anyone, if that was the case.

He ended up sitting with Jack Sloane in the back of Abby's lab. They'd hustled all the parents into the safer space of the morgue. Abby flitted around like a demented butterfly trying to protect her equipment and evidence, darting betrayed looks at Gibbs, and no one else wanted to be next to a pariah. The latter didn't bother Gibbs; he sure as hell didn't want to talk about his fucked up meltdown earlier or his worries this might be his fault somehow or anything. Sloane was okay; she kept whatever she was thinking to herself.

An hour passed to the tune of the sirens. The cellular network was jammed, and any landlines were either dedicated or overwhelmed too.

When the sirens stopped, the silence that followed seemed delicate as a flower petal drifting on the wind. The blank television screens flickered back into life with a picture of the empty White House Press Room.

"Think we're going to get the story?" Sloane asked.

"I think we're going to get a story," Gibbs said dryly. But it wouldn't be the truth. He expected the
old anger and frustration to rise, but nothing came. He was just tired and relieved that none of the people in the basement with him had been hurt.

The President's press secretary came to the podium. She looked white around the eyes and her hands, holding a sheaf of papers, rattled them. Five reporters were in the room, gathered up close to the podium. AP, Routers, and whoever had been on hand, Gibbs guessed.

"What the hell is going on?" one of them demanded.

The press secretary stepped up and touched the microphone of the podium. She set her papers on it but didn't look down to consult them. "There will be no questions at this time, merely a statement."

She took a deep breath, straightened her shoulders, and began, "Today, the United States and the Federation of Russian Republics have faced attacks from within by fanatics intent on setting off a world war and destroying both our countries. In both cases, our courageous militaries were able to defend the capitol and Moscow from aerial attacks by agents of these terrorists. The Presidents of our two nations were made aware of the impending attacks by Homeland Security and made immediate contact with each other, displaying calm and wisdom that saved untold lives."

She was clutching the edge of the podium, her fingers gone white with the pressure.

"Who was behind the attacks? Will there be more? Have there been casualties? Was anywhere else targeted?" the reporters volleyed at her.

She ignored them and continued, "Our forces were able to intercept and stop the attackers over the Atlantic. There were casualties; the Navy and Coast Guard are conducting search and rescue or recovery operations now. The Russian Air Force successfully defended Moscow. In addition, a rogue element stole an experimental aircraft from Groom Lake and was shot down over the Las Vegas Strip after firing on the Luxor Hotel, resulting in thirteen casualties and as yet unaccounted numbers of wounded.

"There were minor casualties caused by debris from Las Vegas shootdown as well. Hospitals there, here, and in surrounding areas are treating people injured as a result of panic. There are some reports of looting. The police will and are dealing with those."

She took a deep breath and concluded, "In the coming weeks, there will be arrests as we identify the traitors within our own government who facilitated these attacks. We request that all citizens cooperate fully with investigators, but there is no reason for panic. We have survived relatively unscathed. Please return to your normal pursuits. You are safe. The President will address the nation this evening. Thank you and God bless us all."

The reporters tried more questions, but the press secretary hurried from the room.

Gibbs got to his feet and handed Sloane up.

"The world didn't end," she commented.

Dozens of ringtones were sounding as the network returned to function. Families and friends checking in, no doubt.

Alducci was in the hall, on the phone with one of his kids. Someone else was in the bathroom, throwing up, post-pressure nerves. Palmer was nervously shooing people out of his morgue. McGee and Abby were huddled over one of her computers. Bishop was deep in conversation with Balboa. Reeves and Torres were taking down the plywood they'd nailed over Abby's windows. Bromfield was checking people off her list as they filed out.
It was dark outside, but the streetlights were on. Vance was already gone, no doubt headed for his office and a long night of phone calls from higher ups. He'd probably ignore them long enough to check on his kids, though.

"It doesn't," Gibbs said, "It just feels like it sometimes."

He had a letter to write.

Miko

The death gliders were engaged in atmosphere, thanks to the Russians, *Daedalus* and *Apollo* were dealing with their own mutinous crews, so that left the ha'tak for *Revenge* and *Tempestas*.

Miko sank into the captain's chair on *Tempestas'* bridge. It didn't boast the system control links the command chair deep inside did, but it did recognize the ATA and respond to her. The ship was less sentient than a cat, but there was an awareness of itself and its purpose. Miko couldn't help stroking her fingers over the gel pads, petting it a little. The ship almost hummed, eager to please her.

A distant part of her noted that and added another reason she despised the Alterans. Leaving *Tempestas* to drift, abandoned in the dark, was tantamount to abandoning your pet in the desert. Unforgivable as far as Miko was concerned.

The Alterans who built the gate network and Atlantis had been brilliant beyond belief, but the Alterans who thousands of years later ran away from their problems, then gave up and Ascended had degenerated into irresponsible cowards. Ascension hadn't improved them.

The defeat of the System Lords hadn't improved the scum and bottom feeders who had always existed on the fringes of the Goa'uld empires, either.

*Revenge* fired on the ha'tak. The railguns did little to its shields, but they were followed by more powerful weapons Vala had had added to the ship.

Miko fired on the ha'tak from an angle, careful that a miss wouldn't find the Tau'ri ships or *Revenge*. A higher orbit satellite did spark bright and die. The ha'tak fired back and *Tempestas* shivered. Her shields remained in place though.

*Revenge* and *Tempestas* fired a volley in sync; energy released violently against the ha'tak's shields, transformed into heat and light. Miko watched the numbers from the sensors. When they had the harmonics, she and *Tempestas* would adjust their weapons and slice through them.

Mer and Radek would be doing the same aboard *Revenge*. They weren't battering the ha'tak pointlessly; every impact generated data to use against it.

*Revenge* found a firing solution first and transmitted it to *Tempestas* as Miko finished her own calculations.

The ha'tak's shield fluoresced the next time it was hit, outlined the entire mothership, and then an explosion tore the hull open. They were beyond the atmosphere above the nightside of the planet. Earth's shadow hid much of their ships but the shield, still lit in green and aquamarine ripples, lit the spray of atmosphere jetting from the ha'tak, gaseous oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, and trace water silently flash-freezing into a cloud of ice and snow.

There would be noise inside the ha'tak: explosions, fire, alarms, the wind whistle of air sucked out by vacuum, airlocks slamming closed to contain the atmospheric breach, alarms, voices raised
in panic and anger.

In vacuum, there was only the mute show of light and darkness.

Miko could hear the rush of air in and out of her lungs in the quiet of Tempestas' bridge.

They harried the ha'tak past the moon, far from where its wreckage could harm anyone or anything.

There were people on the ha'tak, Miko thought, but they were people who had chosen to be there. Criminals, parasites, and carrion eaters.

With its shields shredded and its engines and weapons burned out, the ha'tak was dead in space. Miko listened as Vala told them to surrender. Even as ravaged as it was, the ha'tak could be salvaged.

The ha'tak never replied. It launched a final salvo toward Tempestas.

"Fire," Miko ordered. Her throat was dry from giving orders she barely remembered.

The ha'tak shook, pieces tearing away to fly through space in an endless trajectory, steadily losing momentum, to be lost forever.

"Keep firing."

A cloud of lost atmosphere surrounded the ha'tak as Tempestas' guns reached out and ripped it apart. The final convulsion, as its naquadah imploded, was spectacular. The monitor in front of Miko went white and then dark, overwhelmed. Debris sparked and sparkled against Tempestas' shields.

Miko smiled in satisfaction. She wouldn't have done that before. The woman who lived on Earth couldn't have dreamed of who she'd become. Even joining the Atlantis Expedition had been less choice than necessity. There was no place for her at Area 51 any longer and no chance she could win one at the Mountain or the Antarctica base. She wasn't famous or respected enough. But she couldn't return to Japan and her family's disappointment. She accepted the offer to go to Pegasus when the blood tests came back ATA positive even though it terrified her.

She'd been so small when she walked through the Stargate the first time. So frightened, a timid mouse afraid to even claim the credit for her own work. Always she'd been twice as good as the men but let them treat her like she was only half as good, stood back and to the side, head bowed, while others claimed her work.

It seemed impossible now. She carried knives and a stunner or a gun now. For all the terror of dying, of being a victim of the Wraith, she'd already endured worse. The Genii had taught her three lessons. Being good wouldn't save her from the bad, true loyalty was worth dying for, and she was a survivor.

Tyre, that bastard, had taught her she could eat her own fear and use it to fight.

Also, she liked winning.

The woman she'd been couldn't have given the order to destroy the ha'tak. Miko didn't mourn her. She felt sad for her and all the others crippled and twisted and kept in pots, trimmed back like a bonsai. Kept from becoming who they should have been.
"Naquadah signature," Nalte reported. "Matches a pel'tak. Launching through atmosphere on the far side of the planet. Going to full speed, heading out of ecliptic and the system."

"How long to intercept?" Miko asked even while she checked the numbers herself. Not good. The solutions for *Revenge* or either of the Tau'ri ships were just as bad.

"Too long," Nalte reported. "It will jump to hyperspace before we're in firing range."

"Where did it launch from?"

"The sector identified as North Africa."

Not Trust or Lucian Alliance running from the mess in America. Miko scowled at the course being shown on the monitor. Not a ha'tak, but a pel'tak. Fast, personal transport in comparison.

"Ba'al," she stated.

"Comm from *Revenge."

"Show me."

Vala didn't look as angry as Miko expected. That feral smile should have made Miko shiver. Instead, something thrilled in her to it.

"*Miko, well done.*"

Miko realized the ha'tak had been a test. Vala and *Revenge* could have killed the ha'tak much sooner. *Revenge's* crew were experienced compared with Miko's mixture of Pegasans and former Expedition members. Vala had been holding back so *Tempestas* and Miko could blood themselves.

Maybe that should have bothered her, but Miko understood. Compared to what they might face from the Wraith, one ha'tak was easy. The crew would gain confidence. Vala would know that Miko could handle the stress of command and make the decision to destroy and enemy. Vala always had more than one reason for what she did.

She nodded in acknowledgement and asked, ""What about the pel'tak?"

Vala looked gleeful. *"Time to play the knife up our sleeve."

"Ace, damn it!"* Mer objected from off camera.

Miko blinked then smiled back as she realized what Vala meant.

Vala leaned closer to the screen.

*"Your turn, Aurora."

The cloaked Alteran warship that had been hiding at the edges of the system revealed itself at last. It had easily outpaced the pel'tak and cruised between it and the gravitic limit the Goa'uld ship needed to pass before jumping to hyperspace.

*Aurora* didn't even bring up its shields. Next to it, the pel'tak was a whining mosquito. A single weapon powered up, targeted the pel'tak, struck, and the pel'tak was gone.
An instant later, *Aurora* cloaked again, disappearing from even *Tempestas'* sensors.

Miko opened the ship's internal comms to congratulate her crew.

*Revenge* left them to return to Earth orbit and pick up the surviving 302s and gateships they'd launched earlier.

Miko silently told her ship what a good job it had done. *Tempestas* hummed in satisfaction.
Chapter 27

Jack

Caldwell beamed Jack from Area 51 to the Mountain and when he and Hank sorted their shit out there, back to DC in time to brief the President. The roads were still in a state of gridlock and shut down for blocks around the White House. A Marine Corps helicopter took Jack from the Pentagon straight to the Rose Garden. The crater left by the Goa'uld grenade had already been filled in and replanted.

He'd left Mitchell in charge at Area 51. He had as much rank as Telford, whatever spurious authority came from being on SG-1, and good connections with the Snakeskinners he'd once flown with. Mitchell was banged up, but he could hold down a desk at least.

Somewhere in there, he managed to contact the Ancient Base in Antarctica and demand to know why they hadn't defended against the death gliders and ha'tak. If Mal Doran, Sheppard, McKay, and the rest of their merry band of miscreants didn't hate the Lucian Alliance and the Goa'uld as much as Jack did, they could and would have stayed out of it.

It turned out The Trust had infiltrated the Antarctica base too.

No matter how Elizabeth protested, heads were going to roll. When their ATA operator sat down in the command chair, it fried him like a mozzarella stick, along with Goa'uld that had been controlling him. Sometime after Captain Feng had arrived and had his intake physical and X-ray, someone had given him to a Goa'uld. Given or forced it into him; there was no way to know now. It had to have been one of the Trust Goa'uld brought in secretly in an insulated jar, since no naquadah had been detectable even post-mortem.

Feng couldn't tell them when or who though, not with his brain cooked in his skull. Poor bastard. Elizabeth's horrified description included half-cooked blood oozing from his nose and eyes and ears.

No one else with the ATA had the balls to sit down in the control chair after that (still hadn't), so the death gliders hadn't met a barrage of Ancient drones, and the ha'tak could have swooped in after them if it hadn't been for Pegasans and Chekov's all-girl fighter squadrons.

Jack had stood outside the building and watched Chekov's Space Witches engage with the death gliders overhead. It had been beautiful, like fireworks in the twilight, except he'd known it was people dying up there.

But, damn, those women could fly! He should have found time to call Chekov and tell him. He'd made damn sure they got to land and refuel before they cloaked and headed back to Russia.

It had been a good surprise meeting Tolineva again.

That had been about the only nice surprise he'd had in years. Most of his nightmares were about surprises like running into Ba'al at a White House dinner party or Anubis attacking.

The image of a Goa'uld mothership hovering over the White House like something from a shitty sci-fi movies haunted Jack. The chaos would have killed more people than the Lucians' Jaffa.

He put as many of his ducks in a row as he could and issued orders with a reckless abandon. Odds were good he wouldn't be coming back to his office any time soon, so he pocketed his jammer
doohickey. He looked around for anything else he'd be sorry to lose, but the office was drearily impersonal. It was deliberate; Jack preferred to keep things like pictures of SG-1 at home, but it also said a lot about how little he loved this job. No, the President could fire him (or ask for his resignation) and Jack would give it.

He should have known he wouldn't get away that easily. He was getting a bigger office, two more stars (how the hell did that even happen?) and more secret medals. Fate hated him.

Somehow, the president equated Jack having a contusion where Telford pistol-whipped him to Jack being the one to save him and DC (and the world, but Jack was doubtful this President could grasp that concept), as well as his conviction that Jack had saved him from being snaked earlier in the week. Jack walked out of the White House with a double promotion (four goddamn stars, what the hell?) and his authority expanded to the NID answering to him.

He was thrilled. That's what he'd told the President. Thrilled to have the job of cleaning out that snake pit. The man just didn't get sarcasm. It was a tragedy. But cleaning out NID did have to be done. Jack decided to put Barrett in as Director for his sins. Misery loves company and all that.

A driver with an armored car was waiting for him when he left the White House. Sergeant Cho was sitting in the back, with updating briefings. Jack listened with his eyes closed. Cho had already been to his house and had a fresh uniform for him – complete with new insignia. Cho was psychic as well as scary. He could never let her meet Mal Doran.

It was just as well she had his keys, though. He'd be sleeping in his office if he got any sleep at all for the next week. Cho would make sure his coffee maker was unplugged.

He insisted the car stop at an elite liquor store before heading back to the Pentagon, and commed Caldwell to beam his purchases directly to *Revenge* with his compliments. A proper pirate deserved a proper pirate drink, after all. He had one more stop after that.

The sun was rising when they arrived at the Navy Yard, gold chasing silver and making Jack wish for a good pair of aviator sunglasses.

He left Cho and his driver and walked into the parking lot just in time to meet Gibbs on the pavement in front of his ridiculous yellow Charger.

**Vala**

Vala lifted a bottle from the wooden crate. It was one of several, all packed tightly in straw.

"A proper drink for a proper pirate," she repeated the message from O'Neill.

Caldwell had looked amused when he relayed it.

It wasn't wine. She'd learned the shape Tau'ri used to bottle their wine. The Tau'ri had very, very fine wines and liquors, Vala had been delighted to discover. She'd directed the procurers working through Quindozum to purchase a great deal of Earth alcohols, and to make sure they brought along cuttings from as many vineyards and varieties as possible, along with recruiting a knowledgeable vintner.

"What did he send?" Jehan asked. He came over to peer into the crate. Vala passed him the bottle.

Mer joined them.

Mer had another, different bottle out. "Appleton Estate Jamaican Rum." He pulled out another. "Clément VSOP Rhum Vieux Agricole, Ron Zacapa Gran Reserva Especial, El Dorado, Mount Gay… This is the good stuff."

Jehan hefted the bottle in his hand. "I'll just keep this."

"Ha," Vala said and snatched it back. He didn't fight her, just grinned. "So, rum?"

"Has no one ever shown you Pirates of the Caribbean?" Mer asked.

"No."

"I can safely predict you will love it," Jehan said.

"Rum is the traditional drink associated with pirates and sailors," Mer explained. He unearthed a couple more bottles. "But I can safely say that this wasn't the rum they were drinking. O'Neill didn't stint. Some of this is twenty or thirty years old."

"I bet Hetty could tell us all about it," Jehan added. He needed shave and to change into more normal ship clothes; he and Mer were still dressed for Earth. He smiled and bantered, but there were bruised-looking hollows beneath his eyes, and except for with Mer, he was as skittish as Vala remembered him being when she first found him.

This trip to Earth had not been kind to him. If they were ever forced to return, she would keep Jehan and Mer both aboard. It wasn't even the time in Ba'al's hands that hurt him the most, Vala thought. It was the Tau'ri imprisoning him and separating him from Mer. They'd abandoned and forgotten him once, now they had treated him as a traitor.

Plus, his family. Vala wished she'd been close enough to hear whatever venom Jehan's father had spewed. Though breaking one of those champagne flutes and using it to gut the man would have created a scene. She'd never had a problem with that, though.

Mer at least had had a reunion with his sister that hadn't ended in recriminations and anger, even if she had refused to come to Atlantis with her family.

"We'll take a bottle or two to the mess after we're in hyperspace," Vala decided. They could all use a little relaxation and she enjoyed Tau'ri movies even when they made little sense. The lack of Goa'uld and Jaffa in them was a heady recommendation. "Everyone deserves a celebration. O'Neill sent several cases of beer as well. And then someone can show us all this Pirates movie."

"Are we going straight back to Atlantis?" Mer asked. He sounded reluctant and glanced at Jehan.

"No," Vala said. She had other plans. Aurora and Tempestas would return immediately. They were loaded with materials and personnel Atlantis needed and the people who had signed up deserved to get there as soon as possible. But there were a lot of bolt holes and caches around the Via Stella she could clean out, not to mention people who weren't Tau'ri who would be good additions to the city and the crews.

They might even take out some Lucian Alliance shipping for old times' sake before they headed home.

**Jehan**

Jehan took Revenge past Sol's gravitic limit (much closer in than if they'd been flying a ha'tak, only fractionally farther out than an Asgard ship would need, and he wouldn't think about the Alteran
ships that could ignore it entirely, which offended both his loyalty to Revenge and his sense of math) and jumped them to hyperspace so smoothly the less experienced passengers never noticed.

He watched the glowing, roiling blue of hyperspace for a moment, but no longer. Looking to long made him start to think about how you couldn't actually 'see' hyperspace, it was a dimension humans had no senses to observe. What he 'saw' was his brain's frantic effort to interpret data it shouldn't have been aware existed.

If Radek and Mer and Lindsay and Sam got enough ruus wine in them, they'd start theorizing about that. Radek believed that their ability to 'see' anything proved there was more to consciousness than neurochemical cocktails and synaptic webs. Mer argued that seeing hyperspace was a conditional psychosis to safeguard their minds from the reality that nothingness couldn't really be grasped. Sam and Lindsay would take different sides depending on how drunk they were. Miko, if they could rope her in, talked about souls.

Whatever the truth, if Jehan thought about it too much he ended up with a headache.

He checked their course once more.

Mer turned his station over to the second shift engineer and came over to stand behind him at the pilot's console. He squeezed Jehan's shoulder lightly.

"Come on. We both need showers and sleep."

Jehan leaned his head back against Mer's stomach. He let his eyes droop closed for second, absorbing the feel of the ship through his other senses. He'd feel foolish, but he'd seen Mer and Miko and Radek and even Vala all touch a bulkhead and cock their heads, absorbing the subtle sense of the power running through the ship. There was a hum to it when all was right, as steady and comforting as a heartbeat.

"Kem-fa is here."

Jehan nodded, opened his eyes, and switched out his Olesian second shift counterpart.

Kem laughed at him when he lingered. "Get out. This is my shift."

"Nice to know I'm appreciated," Jehan drawled.

"Oh, you are," Kem assured him. "I'd hate to have get up early enough to sit main shift."

Jehan let Mer drag him away by the hand. He did badly want a shower.

Revenge's showers were still shared and relatively utilitarian, despite Vala's 'improvements'. They never ran out of hot water, but they weren't comfortable or private enough to encourage lingering. Soaping up and rinsing off, Jehan admitted to himself that he looked forward to one thing on their return to Atlantis. The city's baths. Although the en suites attached to private quarters weren't remarkable by the luxury standards of Earth, Atlantis had public baths that put the Romans, Turks, Japanese and Russians to shame. The Alterans who built Atlantis – not to be confused with the ones who inherited and abandoned it later – had clearly spent a great deal of time in the baths, conducting both social and professional relationships there. Sybaritic and user friendly, they were scattered all over the city, but Sam had shut down all but one to save power and discourage people wandering into unsecured areas. One was enough for the city's current population.

They really needed more potentia. Mer could marry one to Revenge's systems and swore the ship would be ready to go toe-to-toe with a Wraith hive. Aurora, Hip, Tempestas and Tria would all
level up with a potential to call on. One for the Death Moon would secure the system against anything but a mass hive assault.

Pipe dreams for the moment.

Jehan made his way back to his and Rodney's quarters, dropped his towel and crawled into their bed. The showers might not be special, but the beds Vala had insisted on were amazing.

He sprawled there, naked and relaxed, contemplating if it was worth the effort to find some sleep pants. After the blinded, half-smothered trip from Vancouver to NCIS HQ and the uncomfortable, sleepless night in its holding cell, the comfortable smells and sounds of their quarters were a balm.

He hadn't moved when Mer came in, all damp, cross and delicious. Mer, being Mer, had dressed again rather than walking down a short corridor in a towel or even a robe. His short-clipped hair was still mostly wet, the straight fringe at the front making him more like Caesar than ever.

He picked up Jehan's towel and chucked in the hamper. "Can't you ever pick up your towels?"

"Why, when you'll do it?" Jehan teased.

"Because I'm going to pick them up and space them one of these days, you uncouth exhibitionist." Mer's gaze strayed of Jehan. His annoyed tone gave way to a huskier one. "I see they didn't beat you up."

Jehan stretched and wriggled, enjoying the bed and the way Mer's eyes followed his movements. He was too tired to really want to fuck, but it still felt good, knowing the desire between them would be there when he did.

Mer let out a chuff and began stripping off his own clothes. Jehan watched with a smile. Mer was solid where he was lanky, built like a brawler, and there was nothing Jehan liked better than holding onto those broad, pale shoulders.

Sometimes it was nice that there was nothing about Mer that reminded Jehan of Ba'al, when ugly memories bubbled up from his subconscious like swamp gas.

Jehan made room on the bed and Mer climbed on with him. They nudged up next each other, thigh to thigh, elbows, and shoulders. Heads beside each other to all they had to do was turn to look. Jehan did and smiled, amused as always by the profile of Mer's nose.

"Asshole," Mer said.

Jehan turned on his side and wiggled closer, leg over one of Mer's, arm slung over his midriff. He liked the little bit of softness there. Mer was cushiony.

"Mmm," Jehan hummed. He was hovering near sleep when Mer started talking.

"I was afraid to call Jeannie."

"Because we disappeared again after dinner with Kaleb with a K?"

Mer snorted. "Why couldn't Gibbs have kidnapped us before Jeannie subjected me to tofu and lentil stew."

Jehan hadn't enjoyed Jeannie Miller's vegan dinner either. He'd eaten MREs with more flavor.

"I'm sorry she wouldn't come with us," he said.
"She didn't even believe us," Mer replied. "It was a little insulting. Who knows what she thinks now. We got black-bagged off the street in front of her house."

He had a point. That had been bad. Not what a nice Canadian stay-at-home mom expected to see on her suburban street. Jehan wondered if she called the cops. Jeannie seemed like someone who would call the cops. He imagined her raising hell, trying to find her missing not-dead-after-all brother.

"She probably thought we were being taken back to the asylum."

"With bags over our heads?" Jehan asked. "At gunpoint? Canadian mental health is hardcore."

Mer's chest rumbled under his arm as he chuckled.

"I'm sorry," Jehan told him sincerely. Mer had wanted his sister and her family to come to Atlantis. He'd wanted her kid to have a place in building a new world-state, a place where his sister's intelligence could shine, and incidentally a place that didn't have a looming threat of invasion by god-powered fanatics in its near future. He kept his personal opinions of Jeannie McKay Miller to himself. They wouldn't help, and she wasn't bad, just a little annoying. He was biased after all. He'd always be on Mer's side, even when he disagreed with him.

"I can't make decisions about her life," Mer said. "That's what she said when she married the English teacher."

"Still sorry."

Mer hummed to himself. "Sorry your dad and brother are both egocentric pricks."

Jehan pressed a kiss to Mer's chest. "Yeah." He hadn't wanted to see them but was half glad that he had. They'd just confirmed his choices. John Sheppard was a ghost. Jehan didn't belong to Earth. He wouldn't regret never seeing it again.

"We're never going back, are we?" Mer murmured.

"Probably not."

He listened to the ventilators; the soft sound of air circulating was soothing. It meant all was right with the ship.

"I'm surprisingly okay with that," Mer said eventually. He sounded a little surprised.

"Nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there?" Jehan asked.

Mer laughed. "Two kidnappings in one trip is more than my nerves can take. I'm sensitive, you know."

"Sure you are."

"I am!"

"You're about as sensitive as those herd things on Pelat; the ones that eat that sulfur algae in the boiling hot springs."

"Well, I am also tough."

Mer was. Tough and amazingly resilient, like Vala, and Teyla, Miko and Radek and Lindsay, and
everyone in the Pegasus galaxy. Mer was easily hurt, no matter what Jehan joked, but break him and he would just put himself back together, stronger, and better than before. Mer wouldn't give up, ever.

Jehan hugged him. Mer patted his back comfortably. They'd talked about Ba'al and what Jehan had done with him after Paris. It wasn't all right. Mer had been so careful about touching him afterward, like Jehan was a candy glass bottle full of naquadria. Jehan had had to convince him that Mer's hands on him, Mer's kisses, and sex, whenever they had it again, was nothing like with Ba'al.

In return, Mer had convinced him that fucking Ba'al hadn't been a betrayal, premeditated or not.

It was true. Mer was Mer. Meredith Rodney Ingram McKay. The only one in that big skull was his. Mer would never do anything to Jehan that Jehan didn't consent to. And Jehan would never be haunted by wondering if what he did wasn't rape of the host. Even the Tok'ra, you couldn't trust they weren't manipulating their hosts or flat out lying.

"I wouldn't be mad if you got a tattoo or ate slugs or died your hair or sang to him."

"I can't sing."

"I know."

"You're sure – "

"You did what you had to do to get Vala and Teyla and yourself away from him. It was nasty, I'm sorry you had to do it, but I don't feel betrayed, because you didn't betray me. I know the difference between necessity and love."

"You think it was him in the pel'tak?" Mer asked.

Ba'al.

"Probably."

"Good."

The door dinged and slid open. Jehan would have lunged for a weapon, but only one other person on Revenge could just open their door.

The hatch locked behind Vala.

"I'd have been here sooner if I'd known you were going to put on a show," she remarked as she began stripping.

Jehan looked at Mer. Mer asked, "Did you invite her?"

"No, did you?"

It didn't matter. Vala was welcome. She was theirs and they were hers.

She fit herself in with them on the bed. Her hair got caught and Mer took and elbow in the ribs, but soon they were arranged again, skin to skin, and the last tension in Jehan relaxed. Ba'al was gone (probably). Earth was behind them. They were on their ship, with their crew, new and old, and he was with the two people he loved and trusted most in the universe.

"I could sleep for a decade," Vala muttered, going boneless and drowsy. She sighed in a gust. "Til
wants to go back to his homeworld."

"He wants to leave us?" Mer demanded, his voice a high squeak.

"No," Vala answered. "It's about Dil. He wants to do some ceremony there."

"Oh. Well, we can do that." Mer relaxed again.

"Yes. I think he wants to warn them about the Ori, too. Either that or kill the head priest. Maybe both."

"Revenge is good," Mer murmured. "The articles Radek and I put together should be hitting the Internet today. Tunney's going to be destroyed."

There was no one so vindictive as a pissed off academic.

"Hmm. And the flaming shit?"

"Will arrive randomly, in sealed, disguised packages, and ignite when he opens them," Mer said with deep satisfaction.

Vala laughed.

"So, after we check out if Lodenesia is real and at the coordinates we have?"

"Why not?" Jehan murmured.

"Yeah, why not?"

Vala pushed her knee between his thighs in a move that made him think they might fuck later. After they'd slept for at least a full shift, but before they came out of hyperspace. Vala was always fun and maybe having her with them would help Mer relax a little.

He felt Vala's body sink into sleep first, then Mer's breathing slowed. Jehan let his eyes close and slept.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

We started this with Gibbs, so we'll end it with him too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gibbs

Gibbs sat on his sofa, bag of frozen peas held gingerly to his nose, and stared at his empty and cold fireplace. It was summer, so he hadn't had it lit for months, but even before, he couldn't think of the last time he made cowboy steaks in it with anyone. It must have back when Fornell was camped on his sofa, recovering from the gunshot wound.

He wondered if he should have recognized the sign of changes coming when Fornell left the Bureau.

He wondered if he could take up Fornell's offer and join him as a private detective.

No. it wasn't for him. Despite the mistakes and missteps that he'd made, he'd joined NCIS for the right reasons. He'd wanted to find justice for other marines and sailors. He'd lost sight of that along the way and it had become about him and winning, no matter what damage that left in its wake.

Breathing through his mouth left his throat dry. It ached. But he didn't know if he could face going down to the basement for his bottle of bourbon. He'd have to look at the latest damned boat and face that it was all he had to occupy his days from now on, when it was barely enough to distract him through his sleepless nights.

He thought of calling Hollis, but her number had been disconnected. He'd persuaded McGee to do him a last favor as he was cleaning out his desk and so he had her address, but a sinking feeling told him she wouldn't be there. Now or ever again.

She was gone, like all those others, into some mysterious ether. Hetty Lange and Detective Deeks had vanished too. Reports from the LA offices indicated their homes had been cleaned out. Hetty's bank accounts had been shifted to Callen, Miss Jones, a few people who were probably in her will, and a charity for Hollywood costume seamstresses.

Deeks' dog was gone.

Gibbs found that more impressive than anything else. Whoever they were, they were thorough.

Callen and the rest of his team, minus Deeks, had checked in once the phones were back up. They were somewhere outside Des Moines and planned to rent a car to drive back to LA since commercial air traffic was still grounded. Callen had been tight-lipped about what happened, saying only they'd stumbled into a classified op and been detained to ensure op security.

Asked about Deeks and Hetty's appearance and disappearance from NCIS headquarters, none of them had any answers. None they were willing to give, at least.

Gibbs still didn't know how it had all fitted together, from Col. Young's murder to London and its
enigmatic targets with their expensive Maltese passports to the mysterious Quindozum corporation or how that connected to O'Neill's blacker than black SAP and simultaneous terrorist attacks on the US and Russia.

He was never going to know, either, he realized. It rankled.

He didn't even have anyone to complain to about it.

Who else was there to call, to talk to, in his life? Gibbs dropped his head back against the sofa and groaned. The bag of peas, half melted, slid off his still painful nose and landed next to his hip with a wet plop. Jack had done a real number on him, even though he'd looked like he'd been through the wringer. Gibbs knew what it looked like when you'd been tied up and had the shit beaten out of you.

With a grimace at the water soaking into his pants and his couch, Gibbs picked up the peas and slung them into the fireplace. The plastic bag split with a splat, spattering green BB-like peas out onto the floor. Better than throwing empty beer bottles, though.

Exhaustion and regret weighed him down, even though he hadn't eaten since the day before and stomach acid was crawling up his throat. The taste of bile hovered at the back of his tongue. Heartburn. It sounded fitting for how he felt.

He scrubbed his hands over his face and into his hair. It needed cutting again. He'd gotten away from the next thing to a Marine buzzcut, but not too far. He needed a shave too, something he made a point of doing twice a day. Mostly because he didn't like the white whiskers, which had showed up years before his hair went there.

No use to pretending he wasn't too old for the field anymore, though, was there? Not like he needed to front to Ducky to hold onto his field agent status. He'd handed Leon his letter of resignation before he walked out into the too bright morning and found Jack O'Neill waiting for him.

O'Neill hadn't waited to say anything. He'd punched Gibbs in the face. He might ride a desk, but he was still damned fit. Gibbs nearly fell on his ass. That would have been the final humiliation. O'Neill had glared at him silently, shaking out his hand.

"Assaulting a Federal officer – " Gibbs had snarled. Except he wasn't one any longer.

"Can't take a punch, Jethro?"

Blood had been pouring from his nose. Gibbs had glared at him. If his hands hadn't been full, he'd have thrown his own punch.

Instead, he'd spat onto the pavement. "You win," he said. He was out. No badge. No job. No reason…

O'Neill shook his head in disbelief. Disgust colored his tone. "People died who didn't have to, because they were scared, because we dropped the ball. That's not winning. Not in my book."

"How did you do it? After Charlie. How'd you keep going?"

O'Neill flinched, but Gibbs had asked sincerely, not as an attack, and he must have heard as much. He flexed his punching hand again. Looked past Gibbs to somewhere only he could see.

"I didn't have anyone to shoot for revenge except myself," O'Neill said.
Gibbs flinched at that. O'Neill knew about Hernandez and what Gibbs had done, out in the Mexican desert with a sniper rifle years ago.

"I had the gun in my hand when I got called in. One last op and if it went wrong, then I scorched the earth, including my team and the civilian with us." He shook his head. "Danny showed me if it was worth dying for it was worth living for, so I did. That's all. I did. I do."

Gibbs had never put his weapon to his head. He'd kept himself angry all these years, never let go of it. It had cost him three divorces, too many friends, and finally, today, his badge. He thought without it, he'd be where O'Neill had been, but there was no one left yank him back from the edge.

"The bastard that killed Louis Young and his friend Reinhart is dead," O'Neill said. "His buddies got shot down or blown up. They were the same assholes that killed the Marines in London. If you care about that. NCIS was never going to catch them; you messed up the people and the op that would have before they made their move."

He'd turned and walked away then, out of the parking lot to where an armored gray town car was double-parked, waiting for him. O'Neill got in the back and it slid away into morning traffic while Gibbs watched.

He'd dropped his box of crap into the trunk of the Charger and thought about going back inside the NCIS building and getting Ducky or Palmer to fix his nose. It hadn't been worth the humiliation. When his eyes had stopped watering, he'd driven home and yanked it back into alignment himself.

O'Neill had gone on a suicide mission and survived. He hadn't drowned in bitterness, even though his guilt must have been even worse than Jethro's. Even though he never stopped hurting or mourning.

Gibbs levered himself off the couch and went down the stairs to basement. With the overhead bulb casting an almost yellow light, the raw wood looked creamy pale. It wasn't finished, but the curves were smooth, and the joins were precise. It would be a beautiful boat when he finished staining and sealing the wood. Over the years of sleepless nights spent constructing things in his basement, he'd grown damned good at it. But what did building a boat in his basement, over and over, gain him or anyone?

There were other things he could build. He'd made a rocking chair once and a bassinet. He did all the carpentry and repair work on the house. He could hang a door, fit a window, lay a floor, even build and hang cabinets.

He was little old to join a construction crew, though. And he still didn't want to do something that was strictly for a paycheck anyway.

There was the Christmas when he volunteered repair work at the VFW. That had been satisfying. One of the other guys working had mentioned building houses for the homeless… Habitat for Humanity. He could do that. He had the guy's card somewhere.

Gibbs could call him.

He… would. He would call. He was more than just a sniper. More than just an investigator. He'd lost that. He'd get it back. Be someone. Do something. Look himself in the eyes in the mirror. Get his head screwed on straight, the way he should have done decades ago.

Shannon would have despised the way he'd been treating people for years and he cringed at the thought of Kelly dealing with a father that acted the way he did.
What had O'Neill said? *Do something*. Gibbs straightened his shoulders. He'd never been a coward. If Batshit Jack O'Neill could carry his son's weight and still live, then Gibbs could do it too.

A familiar creak from the stairs made him look up as Fornell came down them. Fornell made a face at him. "I thought I'd find you down here. Wasn't sure I'd find the boat in one piece." He must have heard Gibbs was out. No surprise, since there were plenty of people who would be eager to spread the news, even after yesterday. Or maybe because it was a relief to think about petty, vindictive grudges instead of looking over the edge into the abyss.

Gibbs found the bourbon bottle and two clean jars. He poured a shot in each.

"Nice shiners you've got started," Fornell went on. He wasn't going to directly address Gibbs losing his badge. Gibbs still hated him, but he was a good friend. Fornell hadn't shown up because he loved the smell of sawdust, after all. Gibbs lifted his jar.

Fornell accepted his shot and lifted it to match Gibbs'silent toast. "What's with the nose job?"

"I got punched by a four-star general."

"Rank hath its privileges. Plenty of people have wanted to punch you. Myself, more than once. Maybe you could give me his name. I'll send him a thank you note. Maybe a fruit basket."

Gibbs snorted and tried a small sip. He didn't want to get drunk. He already felt sorry for himself. His stomach gurgled loudly.

Fornell rolled his eyes. "Come on. I'll make a salad while you burn a couple of steaks."

Gibbs would usually just remain silent, but he forced himself to speak.

"Thanks, Tobias."

Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap!

It's been a great ride, folks. Coming back to the AU and fandom reminded me of all I loved about it.

If anyone wants to take this AU out for a spin and add their own stories to it, nothing could make me happier. There's a lot of room for our heroes and heroines to get into trouble and out what with them ranging over two galaxies. There's still the Ori problem, the Pegasus Asgard, and the Asurans, along with the Wraith.

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