Said the Joker to the Thief

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by greenbirds, ivorygates

Summary

If this isn't the absolute worst Monday Gibbs has ever experienced, it's certainly in the top ten.

He spends his days (early mornings and late nights and all the interminable hours in between) counting his blessings. Such as they are. Such as he's willing to admit to (in the Brave New World he has every right to be surprised at: he never thought he'd live to see it). He has shiny shoes and shiny stars and two doors (and Master Sergeant Irene M. Calloway, to whom he's proposed marriage at least once a week since they dragged him out from under the Mountain and sent him here) between him and anybody who wants his attention. He has a desk and a window and a comfy chair and a "conversation group" in the corner and a liquor cabinet that probably shouldn't be here (but he deals with a lot of civilians even these days and if they've come to the Pentagon to talk to the head of Homeworld Security the least he can do is get them drunk), but the greatest of these is the freedom to play stupid games when he's the only one who knows he's playing. God knows he has no real use for desk drawers (Calloway is efficient, Calloway is terrifying, Calloway knows unwatched files tend to vanish into dimensions even Carter couldn't find, so she's in-and-out of his office half a dozen times a day, demanding the key to the castle and locking the files up in the file cabinet in the corner that's probably wired to explode if somebody tries to look up its skirt), so he fills them with the things that make life bearable. The collection of silly cards and postcards from Colorado that came over the years (nothing written en clair; they've all had too much practice). The yo-yos and tennis balls and hacky-sacks and Slinkys that have the sacred purpose of annoying the living shit out of the right (wrong) people. Golf balls, because he has a putter in the corner and one of the perks of the job is being able to get in a little golfing between meetings. A couple of photos he's damned if he's going to put on public display. The odd piece of alien technology so top-secret even the wonks at Area 51 don't know about them: a favor from a friend. (Favors -- bought and sold and traded and hoarded -- have been the currency of his life for more than three decades, the only constant in his life.)

A few souvenirs.
He gave up smoking over a decade ago (on a planet they named Abydos, and Sara'd bitched at him for ten years to quit, and he only did when it was too late to matter), and he gave away his lighter. Six years later he got it back as accidentally as he gave it up (and Abydos is gone and Skaara won't need it any more; he's pretty sure the Ascended don't have pockets) and he's kept it ever since. Not in an obsessive way, but it's been ... around. He isn't really expecting to bump into it when he's scrabbling in the back of the center drawer (because the last time Calloway gave him back the key to the file cabinet he tossed it in the drawer and he's spent the morning getting through files and he knows she'll be swooping down on him soon), but he does, and it goes slide-thunk and he knows what makes that sound so he pulls it and the key-and-fob out together. Tosses the key on the desk. Turns the lighter over in his hands. It's a chrome Zippo, nothing special aside from the fact it's got the AFSOF emblem on it, and not everybody gets that particular brass ring. (7th Special Operations Squadron out of RAF Mildenhall, 352 SOG, and their mandate was peace in Europe and the Middle East. Yeah, nothing new there.)

A gift from a friend. He turns it over. The engraving is still sharp, despite the years and the miles. (Light years.) The unit motto is "Any Time, Any Place", but that isn't what it says on the back.

"...but sometimes the Devil intervenes." The second half of a saying he used to know better than his own name, because when this little homily was the family (unfunny) joke, he changed his name more often than he changed his underwear. A far country, and the wench isn't dead (and anyone who ever called Henrietta Lange a "wench" probably turned into either a pillar of salt or a pile of ash on the spot), but these days he sees her rarely and briefly and (thank fuck) never on business.

He tosses the lighter back into the drawer and goes in search of coffee.

#

The bedside phone jars him awake. A landline. They're more secure, and a landline will get through when the jammer's running. (Half habit to use it these days, half reflexive none-of-your-damned-business.)

Dani grumbles at the sound (not awake) and rolls over, pulling the pillow over her head as he reaches for the receiver. In the last moment before he greets whatever disaster requires his attention in the middle of the night, he thinks of the secrets they won't even tell each other. Russian is Dani's language for secrets; after years of translating for him, she thinks he doesn't know it. "Ya tebya lyublyu, ya tebya lyublyu -- yy moe serdse -- ty moya dusha -- Dzhek, vozlyublennyi, milyi..."

He's never had the heart to tell her the truth.

"O'Neill," he says into the phone, fumbling for the light.

Once upon a time (a thousand years ago and before breakfast, as the Red Queen says), he'd been a Queen's Pawn on the chessboard of the Great Game (Vanya would have called it The Tournament of Shadows; it's thirty years since he's answered to that name). And he left Britain (RAF Mildenhall) and he left Gaul (they'd called it French Indochine once upon a time, and French still got you farther than English did in Saigon), and he left Rome (cursed God because Charlie died and buried his son and his marriage in the same small grave), but what he left in a hopeful forever way long before those things was the whole architecture of damnation, of spies and lies and webs of secrets. And forever isn't as long as it's popularly supposed to be (it never was), and he saw his future looming on the horizon the first time he sat in the Big Chair at the SGC, and he went to Homeworld and went back (once in, never out) to the shadowplay of intelligence, because Disclosure is on the horizon and getting everyone under the Big Top for that circus means knowing who the clowns are and who's on the high wire.
He never wanted to read Dani in to any of it, even though she works for Homeworld these days as an offsite analyst (at a little false-flag called the Aristarchus Institute, which probably doesn't fool anybody) and they both know she's going to be the public face of Disclosure, but he had no choice. From the moment he first threw himself at Farrow-Marshall, he's known he needs to keep the spirit of his oaths and not the letter. The worst part of all (it took him months to accept it, and more to admit it), is that he'd had a *fucking goddamned snake* for an ally, and when the *Tok'ra* captured Ba'al...

Well, Farrow-Marshall wasn't there any more to keep all that tasty Offworld tech out of the private sector. And so he'd taken a good look at what was going to be out there post-Disclosure, and he made a choice. (There's always a choice.) There's a new wind coming, and when that storm breaks (cradle will fall), the Program won't be shaped by duty and honor and desperate idealism, but by the marketplace realpolitik of paper-pushers who've never stared down the snakes or danced on the edge of the abyss.

So he picked his people, and called in his markers. And ever since, he's been dismantling, hiding, destroying all the treasures his boys and girls bought with blood and souls. God help him if that ever comes out. Even being "the last American hero" won't save him. Not from Hayes, and not from the Chiefs. And sure as hell not from the IOA.

He's been lucky so far. He and all his merrie band have been making the secrets vanish for more than a year --- slowly, carefully, deniably, what's a little more laundering of the public record between friends? -- and it's no surprise, really, that tonight their luck's run out. Croft and Mundy (SG-2) were detached to Area 51 six months ago. In charge of Making Things Not Work. He pulled them in for a reason (Marines are invisible on a hundred military installations and he's always gotten on well with the jarheads), and it's coming back to bite him in the ass now.

Because some time last week his op was blown (still doesn't know by who; the only consolation is it can't be Ba'al; he saw the bastard die), and someone spoofed an order from him to them, and so they stopped breaking shit and instead gathered together everything there was on Reole and dargol and *naquaadriah* to bring it to Washington (and maybe some time he'll find out who thought that was a good idea), but right now they're in custody, and that means NCIS, because Marines fall under the jurisdiction of NCIS. And NCIS means one Special Agent Leroy Gibbs, who has cause not to love O'Neill and the things that are his.

He's not sure why his Marines have been picked up (not for the truth, or there'd already be people knocking on his door), but for whatever reason it is (lies, errors, mistakes, enemy action) he knows Gibbs (he knew Gibbs once upon a time), and Time is called the great healer (there are lies, damned lies, and party lines) but the truth is more complicated (it always was): Time is the great alchemist, turning lead to gold, straw to bricks, and Gibbs into O'Neill's own private Chauvelin (they'll always have the sewers of Paris). Gibbs will dig and dig and dig until he finds everything there is to find, and O'Neill can't let that happen.

He can get Croft and Mundy out -- and maybe even find his mole -- but he needs time. He needs to know what kind of case NCIS has made, and why they made it (and he won't get cooperation there, that's for damned sure). He needs to let Croft and Mundy know he's on the case. And he needs to do all of it without tipping his hand. He has a number of assets (Homeworld has more) but it's 3:30 in the morning, the curtain goes up at the Yards in less than five hours, and he needs to send someone Gibbs doesn't know.

Some days his available choices really suck.

"Wakey-wakey," he says, patting Dani's hip.
There's an unintelligible mutter (not true: it's perfectly intelligible, based on years of experience -- his little sweetheart has just told him to fuck off and die), and she pulls the pillow over her head.

"Dani," he says, and playtime's over, and she's up, grabbing her glasses, scanning the room for movement, still not awake (quite), but reactive. Seeing nothing in the room that's a threat (and he isn’t moving either), she focuses back on him.

"I need you to run a message for me," he says carefully. "I need you to go in undercover."

"As who?" she asks, voice still hoarse with sleep. But she's closer to tracking now.

"Yourself."

Naked is the best disguise.

#  

At 0820 on Monday, Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs walks into the NCIS bullpen to start the working week, which means hoping for a good reason to ignore the paperwork. (Five minutes later, his wish is granted. He should really remember his Fairy Godmother has a fucking twisted sense of humor.)

They caught the McConnell break-in over the weekend and he's hoping whoever tipped NCIS to Croft and Mundy's involvement in the wee hours of Monday morning is their partner in crime, because he'd like to follow this one back up the tree and see where it goes. Ziva, McGee, and DiNozzo are all at their desks (for a wonder), and McGee looks up to tell him their two Marines are here from Lockup and in I-1 (together, and Rule Number One is Never Let Suspects Stay Together, but they've been together since they were picked up and Gibbs figures on giving them some time to spook each other -- on audio and video -- before splitting them up to ask them where the fuck the munitions are and what they were planning to do with them). McGee would like to tell him all the reasons why they don't have the jackets on them yet, but it involves words like "server" and "firewall" so Gibbs figures life's too short. He doesn't need their records to ask them why they're selling out their country, but he figures he can give the stuff half an hour to show up. You never know. Something might go right for once.

It doesn't. He hears the elevator doors open and DiNozzo alerts like a retriever that's just sighted pheasant. A moment later he gets to his feet and takes a step toward the window. Then Gibbs hears the voice. A woman's voice. Young, breathless, Southern, and apparently sure her life is of immense interest to the immediate world.

"Oh my goodness I just hope I'm in the right place here -- I got lost on the way over, would you believe it and I know those GPS things are supposed to be accurate but I just can't ever get the hang of -- I'm looking for-- Oh, goodness, I'm not quite sure who I'm looking for--!"

"Can I help you?" DiNozzo asks, sounding hopeful.

"Oh I hope so! It's all because of my performance review -- you don't look like you have any trouble passing those, but my boss, he said to me, Danielle-- Oh my lord! Where are my manners? Danielle Jackson -- don't you pay the least nevermind to that "Doctor" in the front, ever'body says I got it out of a box of Cracker Jack--"

Young and Southern is being escorted by a bewildered-looking agent who looks as if he has no idea what he's doing here. She matches her voice: fluffy and breathless and she looks like she's somebody's secretary, probably some place they hug trees. She's got an arm full of files and an
overstuffed brief bag slung over her shoulder. There's a visitor's badge clipped to her lapel.

"Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo," DiNozzo says. ("Very special agent," Ziva mutters under her breath.) He offers Miss (no, she said it was "Doctor"; probably a PhD in tree-hugging) Jackson his hand. She reaches out to shake it and manages to drop everything in her arms -- a stack of envelopes, file folders, and bound reports (what the fuck?) Papers go flying everywhere. She and DiNozzo both dive to pick them up. By the time she's got them all back in her arms -- only hitting DiNozzo with the briefcase two or three times -- even DiNozzo is wondering why she's here. Too bad he can't get a word in edgewise to ask.

"I'm looking for some criminals!" Dr. Jackson announces (breathlessly). "My boss -- that's Harry -- do you know Harry? -- sent me over here to find out just what in heaven's name is going on, and -- do you think I could see them, Agent DiNozzo? Because--"

"Tony," DiNozzo says, and she dimples at him. "It's Dani," she says. A blessed moment of silence falls. Gibbs clears his throat. "Oh!" she says, spinning around. She offers him her hand, but he waves it away. If she drops all that crap again they'll be here until lunchtime.

"And--?" he prompts, but she's already ramping up to speed again. It takes them another five minutes of high-speed content-free monologue to establish that Gibbs is the head of the team and the one she needs to talk to about these criminals, it's something involving Marines, and Dr. Jackson actually works for one of the Alphabet Agencies. (No matter how low he sets his expectations of Washington bureaucracy, something always manages to surprise him. No surprises there.)

"And -- oh! -- If this is your case or some sort of dealie-bob like that, Agent Gibbs, we wouldn't dream of interfering, only Harry said they were persons of interest to us, which is how we found out they were in NCIS custody -- I swear, all these letters just make my head hurt! -- and--"

It's almost amusing to watch Ziva not having an expression while Southern Bimbo flails and giggles and interrupts herself. Not amusing enough to keep him from wishing she'd get to the fucking point.

"Doctor Jackson," he interrupts (barking loud enough to get himself a look of wide-eyed startlement; DiNozzo just looks hurt). "What. Do. You. Want?"

There's a moment where she actually stops talking. It doesn't last.

"Harry said he wanted me to interview them -- you know, your prisoners? -- and I have the forms -- there are forms for everything, aren't there? -- right here, and you know, technically I am a Field Agent, you know, but that's only on paper, and--"

She advances on his position, managing in the process to drop several files (again), scramble to keep from dropping the rest of them (giggling nervously), and in the process swings around fast enough that her brief bag slams McGee's monitor halfway across the desk before making it across the aisle, where she drops the stack of files on the corner of his desk and begins rooting in her brief bag, from which she extracts (in no particular order) her credentials (he's never heard of the NID before in his life), the wrong forms (three times) her weapon (the sight of which makes her squeak, giggle, and then explain she's supposed to carry it whenever she leaves her office; DiNozzo takes charge of it, thank fuck) and then the right forms. (So she says.)

"--and so if you'll just look at this, Agent Gibbs, and I think you're supposed to sign it? I've never done this before and I am all at sixes and sevens -- do you think these men might be violent--?"

He comes out from behind his desk to take them (maybe they'll be a little more informative than Dr. Jackson is). Apparently she hasn't broken McGee's computer (he doesn't look unhappy enough for
the damned thing to have stopped working). McGee and Ziva are staring at little Dr. Jackson in awestruck disbelief. DiNozzo is hovering.

Gibbs almost has his hands on the paperwork when she manages to knock the stack of files off the corner of his desk. She dives for them. DiNozzo dives for them. She manages to pour the entire contents of her brief bag onto the floor in the process (more papers, bottled water, paperback with a pink cover, a bunch of electronic crap) and then drops the brief bag completely, scoops papers into it (the form she was still holding skitters under his desk), drops her purse (wallet, coin purse, keys, sunglasses, three lipsticks, jewelry, perfume, and apparently half the contents of her medicine cabinet), then says "Oh, Foot!" and bounces to her feet again. She swings around -- apparently having found something she urgently needs to tell Ziva right the fuck now -- sends the files DiNozzo has managed to stack on top of the desk again sliding, realizes her purse is still on the floor, dives down after it--

--and when she bounces up again, Gibbs can't step back fast enough to keep her from clipping his wrist with her elbow.

There's coffee everywhere, but mostly on him.

"It's okay -- I have them right here!" Dr. Jackson cries in delight, waving a crumpled handful of paper. "Oh... dear..."

#

It's 0900, and he really ought to be changing his shirt (it takes a really goddamn special kind of morning for him to end up this pissed off and covered in his own coffee within twenty minutes of walking through the front door) or deciding what to say to Director Vance (this time) or at least cooling down enough so he doesn't throttle Idiot Southern Bitch the next time he sees her. (He'd quit and move back to Mexico, but he's already done that once.) But there's just something about dear little Dr. Jackson with her piles of paper and her breathless Southern charm and her clumsy helpless little flutter that just doesn't sit right with his gut. The McConnell case is weapons trafficking, not espionage; there shouldn't be anything for one of their sister agencies in it. So when DiNozzo gallantly offers to escort Dr. Jackson down to Interrogation One so she can talk to the Big Scary Marines (and she shouldn't worry; he'll be there the whole time and it will be perfectly safe) (it takes all of Gibbs's self-control not to deliver a headslap right then and there), Gibbs doesn't do any of those things. He follows DiNozzo and Idiot Southern Bitch down to I-1. They're already inside when he opens Observation One and goes in.

The Marines are sitting at the table. Dr. Jackson's purse and brief bag are sitting at one end of it. She's walking back and forth telling Croft and Mundy they should be ashamed of themselves and they're going to prison and what would their mothers think? She also tells them that if they don't cooperate completely with the nice Special Agents she'll be very disappointed in them. And what did they think they were doing for heaven's sake?

DiNozzo (ever the gallant do-gooder, and he should have learned better a long fucking time ago) is leaning against the door; he smiles indulgently and tells the Marines they better listen to the nice lady or they'll have him to deal with.

And here's the interesting thing (it's why he came, whether he knew it or not): DiNozzo doesn't need to tell those Marines a goddamn thing about minding their manners. The two of them are watching Dr. Jackson like two guys who have spent their whole goddamn lives waiting for Jesus and she's the angel of the annunciation. What's even more interesting is that the Marines' attention isn't on Dr. Jackson's face (or her tits; let's be honest here), it's on her hands.
Her hands don't fit the rest of her. There should be a couple of rings, a bracelet, long painted nails (he's been married four times; he knows). But her nails are trimmed down short ("Don't call me "sir", Marine, I work for a living!") and as he watches her, he'd suddenly be willing to bet money she knows exactly what to do with that gun she handed over to DiNozzo with a simper and a blush.

Once upon a time there were four people who knew a secret sign language. Hetty taught it to them (to him and Jack and Jenny; Hetty Lange taught them a lot of things Gibbs has spent a bunch of years trying to forget he ever knew.) It was designed for communication in plain sight. Invisible unless you knew what to look for. Impenetrable unless you had the key. And Jenny's dead (and even now, at two years' remove, it still hurts like hell) and Hetty's never believed in sharing information. (Any information. Ever.) And that leaves Jack O'Neill, and the bimbo in Interrogation One signing sit tight and wait to a couple of Marines they picked up last night on an anonymous tip using a sign language she couldn't possibly know.

Rule Number Thirty-Nine: There's No Such Thing As Coincidence.

It was originally There's No Such Thing As Fucking Coincidence, but Hetty didn't approve of his language. (Hetty rarely approved of his language, so that didn't exactly come as a surprise.) He hasn't given much thought to Hetty Lange in years. They both ended up with NCIS, but she's in LA, he's in DC, and the past -- Leningrad and Minsk and motherfucking Poland About Which We Do Not Talk -- is almost thirty years in the past, where it fucking belongs. He doesn't really want to be thinking about her (about any of it) now, but of course that's where Rule Number Thirty-Nine comes in.

("God hates a liar," Jack once told him. God also hated spies, according to Hetty, and sinners, if you asked Jenny back then. Gibbs always privately suspected God just figured he'd save Himself the trouble and hate everyone, but it didn't really matter because Jack O'Neill never had much use for the favor of the Divine, and even less problem lying through his fucking teeth. O'Neill's been lying to him, Gibbs thinks, since dear little Dr. Jackson walked through the door this morning with her cereal-box credentials and her big blue eyes.)

Gibbs watches her hands. A couple of the things she's "saying" as she flutters and stammers for DiNozzo's benefit don't make sense: she tells them the drop-box is compromised, that they're dealing with a double agent. At least her telling them to keep their mouths shut makes sense (as much as anything about this goatfuck does). Gibbs knows in his gut (and his gut is rarely ever wrong), that everything that's happened this morning (even the coffee, especially the coffee) was all for this.

One of the Marines nods slightly. Message received and understood. They're trying to play along, but neither of them is exactly doing a bang-up job of hiding what's going on here (whatever it is). Gibbs has no idea what the fuck is going on here (not yet), but he's sure as hell going to find out.

He yanks the door of I-1 open. "This is over," he snaps, gesturing them out. DiNozzo looks startled, ready to go to war for the Lady Fair. DiNozzo's never met a damsel in distress he didn't want to help.

If Dr. Jackson is startled, it doesn't show on her face. She might be good at this undercover crap, but Gibbs now knows she's not perfect: Idiot Southern Bitch would have been shocked. She might even have cried. Dr. Jackson isn't, and she doesn't. (Hetty always said what you don't say can blow your cover just as thoroughly as anything you do say.) There's ten points Dr. Jackson's lost for her side, and proof positive her little bimbo act is just that: an act.

He really fucking hates being lied to.

He grabs her by the arm as soon as she's out the door. The conference room -- where they question the friendly witnesses -- is upstairs. Gibbs mentally measures out the steps between here and there --
maybe a minute, minute and a half to decide how to play this. ("Think fast," O'Neill would have said, laughing. Before Poland, anyway. Everything changed after Poland.) He'd rather put her into I-2, but there are cameras and one-way mirrors, and he doesn't want any witnesses for whatever the hell this is about to be. DiNozzo (carrying her purse and her briefbag) looks upset, and Gibbs is too busy trying not to strangle the airheaded bimbo to do anything other than fix DiNozzo with a death glare. DiNozzo turns into a pillar of salt. Good. Gibbs is already starting to hate Dr. Jackson just a little for stirring ghosts he'd thought were long buried (or maybe "hoped" is the better fucking word). Maybe her fault, maybe not. Doesn't matter. The conference room will at least put a door in between them and listening ears, his questions and the answers she'd damn well better have.

He doesn't let go of her arm all the way up the stairs. She's already screwed the pooch and named the fucking puppies, but she tips her hand even further now. Idiot Southern Bitch would be whining and blithering and digging in her heels. Dr. Jackson keeps up and keeps her mouth shut. When they get there, he shoves her into the room ahead of him -- hard enough to make her take two staggering steps -- and slams the door behind him. Locks eyes with her, and deliberately makes a gesture he left buried in Leningrad, in Poland, in an unmarked grave in Mexico: Wait. I will come to you.

"What did I just say?" he asks (low and sharp because you need to have somewhere to go, and he suspects if he lets go of his temper broken bones will follow). The momentary "oh shit" look on the woman's face -- and the way she quickly locks it down into an expression of simpering idiocy -- is not what he needs to see to stay one of the good kids, the kind Vance wants to fill NCIS with. Watching her try to think about what new lie to tell him is the last straw.

"You tell me the truth!" he shouts, slamming his hand down on the table (he's pretty sure they can hear him down in the bullpen; if DiNozzo comes barging in here Gibbs will deck him). "It's a code and you know it! You were signaling those two Marines!"

"Hold your present position; we will fall back to you," she says. It takes him a moment to put it together: she's answering his question.

"And what did you tell them?" he asks (even though he knows). He takes another step forward. Men hate to be crowded, women are scared by it. Dr. Jackson doesn't even seem to notice.

"You were watching," she says, and manages to make it sound like he's the one in the wrong.

He'd really like to hit something right now. Maybe the wall. (Maybe O'Neill, but O'Neill's not fucking here. O'Neill's always done his best lying by proxy.) Ever since the McAvoy case O'Neill's sent him nothing but lies inside of lies like those goddamn matryoshka dolls Hetty always liked so much. Overseas. Farrow-Marshall. Now little Dr. Jackson. Gibbs is pretty fucking sure he hasn't yet heard a single truth emanating from the Hall of the Mountain King. All that seems to come out of there is bullshit.

Then again, that's par for the course when you're talking about O'Neill.

"I have two Marines I can make for weapons-trafficking," he says. "I can put you with them right now. Start talking, Dr. Jackson. Or call your lawyer."

"I told them to resist interrogation," she answers equally sharply. Whatever she is, she walked in here to sell him a bill of goods. Now that he isn't buying, she's lost the breathless Southern accent and her voice has dropped half an octave. (He'd still like to throw her into I-2 and see who comes looking, but that's twice now she's given him the meaning of the old signs in military terms.) He doesn't miss how she's been looking around the room since she walked in (doors, windows, points of entry, points of exit; what do you have and what do you need?), and now that she's dropped the smoke and mirrors he revises his estimate of her age north by a dozen years or so. Whoever the fuck she is, she's
"Funny," Gibbs says (only not). "I never figured O'Neill for being this stupid." He still doesn't, but the Marines are tied to the bimbo and the bimbo's tied to O'Neill, and you use whatever you've got as leverage. For a second he thinks it's going to work, but then the simper and the flutter and the Southern honey are back (overlaid this time with a healthy dose of irony).

"I am so, so sorry about your coffee this morning, Special Agent Gibbs! You must have a terrible opinion of me!"

The twitch is a good cover for the signals. She makes the movements slow and obvious, as if she's talking to a backward child, which doesn't improve his temper. We're being watched is how Gibbs knows the sign. ("Watched" but not viewed: her expression is grimly out-of-character with her cover story.)

"At least let me make it up to you," she adds, and glares at him like he's one of the slow kids.

"Answers would be nice." And he's not going to get them in a room she's just told him is bugged. He probably can't crack her either here or in I-2, and there's just one little problem with trying. O'Neill's tangled up with the McConnell case (somehow), and O'Neill's a clown and a bastard and a lying pain in the ass, but he isn't a crook.

"I was thinking more of coffee," she counters (in what he's starting to think of as her "real" voice). "'Coffee'," he says. (Time to fish or cut bait, Gunny.)

"Yeah," she says. "I'll buy. Pay you back for what I spilled this morning. Besides, I need my laptop. It's in my car. You can walk me out."

She isn't giving an order. She's offering an exchange of hostages. It disturbs the hell out of him to think little Dr. Jackson offers hostages as a matter of course.

"Fine," he says, not entirely snarling. He's not entirely sure why he thinks that if he plays along with Dr. Jackson, he might get some actual fucking answers, but what he does know is that the McConnell case is about to blow up in his face. (And what the hell; if she makes a run for it he can console himself by shooting her.)

DiNozzo looks up when they walk out of the conference room (DiNozzo wants to play white knight and it's going to get him killed some day). Gibbs's attention is on DiNozzo just long enough for inevitable goatfuck to take on an element of surprise.

"Dani. What brings you to NCIS?"

Gibbs doesn't hate Director Vance (waste of energy). He doesn't love him either (nothing there to love). And he sure as hell doesn't trust him: Leon Vance is a slick prick, a political animal. They're a dime a dozen on the Beltway. Gibbs is allergic to politics. (Politics means divided loyalties. And these days O'Neill's a creature of the Beltway too.)

"Leon," Dr. Jackson says at his elbow, and she sounds light and happy and wholly innocent (she's not). "I hope I'm not getting anyone in trouble. This is mostly just a social call."

Social call his left ass-cheek, but maybe her lies will keep Vance out of their business. (That's probably too goddamn much to ask, but there's never been anything wrong with hoping.) Vance gives her his "convince me" look, and little Dr. Jackson smiles prettily and chatters away, telling Director Vance that Gibbs and Jack O'Neill are old friends (actually, the words she uses are "they go
back a long way," which isn't quite a lie), and now that O'Neill's in Washington, and Dr. Jackson's in Washington, and (surprise) Gibbs is also in Washington, O'Neill hopes he won't be such a stranger.

He doesn't think he likes the implication that these two (these three) have some sort of prior acquaintance. He doesn't travel in Vance's rarified asskissing circles (and he'll give his left nut to keep it that way), but just now he'd give a lot for five minutes with Leon's desk calendar, because now Gibbs knows Vance and O'Neill move in the same circles, and that Dr. Jackson is so closely connected to O'Neill (how?) that she can't get out of this "social" conversation without mentioning O'Neill's name. (And that sure as hell makes him wonder what the only member of their little band who didn't join NCIS is doing these days, and for who.)

It's "Leon" and "Dani" and "Jack", and she lies like a pro (the best lies are mostly truth, and she knows just how to shade it). Gibbs wonders bitterly how many of their secrets O'Neill's given up (they were secrets for a reason, and meant to stay that way) to Little Miss Tree-Hugger for her to spin this tale of a world without Poland, without Hetty's choice, without his. But at least it makes Vance back off, and that's the whole point, isn't it? She blinks her wide blue eyes (nothing to see here; move along), and doesn't leave Vance a single opening. Vance's next move will be to retreat to his office and brood, which in fact he does, with a last dark, unreadable look over his shoulder. (Jenny had been many things. Sometimes she was even a bitch. But she was never inscrutable.) When he goes, Gibbs feels -- just for an instant -- like he felt that night in Leningrad when they narrowly avoided being nabbed by the militsiya. (Screw Poland. If he never had to think about Russia again he could die a happy man.)

"Coffee," Dr. Jackson says, apparently unmoved by her narrow escape.

He's starting to get the idea she's the kind of woman who's unmoved by a lot of things.

#

The visitor's lot is closer, but they start with coffee anyway (after a detour by his desk for a dry shirt and her purse and the fun of watching his team behave as if he and Dr. Jackson suddenly possess the power of invisibility). They walk in what might be a companionable silence if he were sure about their respective sides -- either she's finally trying to make nice, or she's a woman after his own heart. He can tell she's checking for surveillance as they walk, but only because he expects her to be. (He wonders, if there is someone following her, which corner of the three-letter bureaucracy they'd be from. Or which government. He's pretty the answer wouldn't improve his day.)

When they get there, Gibbs manages to smile at the girl at the coffee cart -- Nadine -- who teases him about having just been there an hour ago. Nadine doesn't get the chance to ask if he wants his usual, because Dr. Jackson orders for both of them. Knows how he takes his coffee (that's got to be O'Neill). Pays for both of them (after spilling his coffee this morning, she'd better), but never touches his cup. He supposes that's professional courtesy. Little late, really.

Next stop, Visitor Parking. She doesn't try to make a break for it, and he doesn't think (too much) about shooting her. Her car, unsurprisingly, is small, innocuous, invisible. Leased. (Black, silver trim.) Official (anonymous) parking decal on the window (some design he doesn't recognize). She chirps it open from the far side of the lot, tense the way people tense when they're just about to rip off a band-aid (and that's really goddamn interesting), but it doesn't explode. He supposes he ought to be grateful for small mercies.

The apparently-vital laptop is in the trunk. The hard-shell carrying case looks custom. Also damn near indestructible. (He wonders -- not for the first time, and probably not for anywhere near the last -- just exactly what the fuck it is O'Neill does these days.) She doesn't have anything to say. Neither does he. The silence continues right up until they reach the lobby doors, whereupon she immediately
begins chattering (Southern Bitch is back) about PowerPoint presentations and her inability to explain anything without a computer and a laser pointer, and asking anxiously (when they reach the metal detector) if the scan will damage her computer. (When she opens it and turns it on for the screening, her desktop is something with purple flowers. Gibbs doesn't believe it for a damn second.)

And then it's up and in, and he can feel his team's eyes on him as they go up the stairs. It doesn't help that the laptop case Dr. Jackson's carrying is much too businesslike for the cover identity of a woman who dropped her purse three times in ten minutes, cheerfully handed DiNozzo her weapon, and then "accidentally" spilled Gibbs's coffee all over him. (It's also too much to hope for that their little chat with Vance wasn't overheard, because it's his team's business to overhear every single thing that goes on in this building.)

Back in the conference room, Dr. Jackson opens the computer case again. Her fingers clatter on the keys. The purple flowers vanish, replaced by an official seal (not one he recognizes; that's no surprise either) and a log-in window. She doesn't bother to keep him from seeing the screen. Either she's too intent on what she's doing, or she doesn't care. (His money's on door number two; so far everything he's seen hints at careful training, and he doubts she'd be that fucking sloppy.) The log-in vanishes, replaced by an oddly-familiar schematic. Takes him a moment to realize what he's seeing is the conference room. There are three blinking dots on the schematic (he doesn't like the look of that). Another set of keystrokes -- they all sound like passwords (long complicated ones, but ones she uses regularly) -- and the schematic vanishes, replaced by a gently undulating sine wave. He doesn't like the look of that either. (He thought he was done with all this cloak and dagger shit when he joined NCIS. Then again, he's long since gotten used to not getting what he wants.)

"Did you know your conference room is bugged?" she asks, the way she might ask him if he knew she had ice cream on his tie. (Suddenly she sounds like Abby.) "I'm jamming now. We can talk." (It's disturbing -- but not surprising -- the conference room is bugged. Jenny would never have done it, but Vance isn't Jenny. Jenny was a keeper of secrets. Vance likes to steal them.)

She waits expectantly. Too bad for her Gibbs knows this game. Hetty's goddamn game; she'd been a grandmaster and an artist. Questions were as revealing as their answers, she said once. Ask the wrong thing and you've just told your opponent everything you know. ("You ask, I answer, I win," Hetty always said.) He sighs and closes his eyes for a second. He figures he's entitled: the headache that started when she'd signed to their two suspects has moved into his temples in earnest, and he's pretty sure there's never been a time when the things wrought by Jack O'Neill have not given him a headache. (Hetty once swore O'Neill was sent to try her; Gibbs would really like to stop thinking about her, but he can't seem to.)

"O'Neill sent you to talk to my Marines," he says. She can't deny it -- Vance pretty well tipped her hand -- but she doesn't say anything. "Maybe you'd like to tell me how he fits in to my case?"

"I'm not sure what your case is," she says. Fishing. He doesn't say anything. "I need your word that anything I tell you doesn't go any farther," she says then.

He smiles coldly. "No deals. You come clean and maybe I don't arrest you as an accessory."

She shoves her glasses back up on her nose and flops down into a chair. "You said you know Jack?" she asks. He doesn't answer that one, either.

There's a little more silence. "The truth, Dr. Jackson. Or we play this by the book." It's as close to a threat as he wants to go right now.

""What is truth, said Jesting Pilate"," she says. It sounds like a quote. "Ike and Jorge weren't weapons-trafficking."
"Funny thing, but I have some people who say they were. And some actual evidence."

"Ha," Dr. Jackson says. Then she sighs. "All right. They weren't doing ... whatever you think they were. They were doing something for Jack."

"'Something'?"

"I'll get to it. They were stationed at Area 51. Someone spoofed our secure communications and ordered them to come to DC. You picked them up. He didn't want you to know he was involved," she says (yeah, that's no surprise). "I was supposed to get in, find out what I could, let Ike and Jorge know we were taking care of it." Right now she's picking and choosing what she's going to tell him. He lets her. She's talking. That's a start. "But now you know." (What he knows is open to debate.) "Home-- Jack's department can't be connected to this. Not until we know more."

"So I call Nellis and have McGee check their communications logs." There are enough holes in her story to lose the Sixth Fleet in; he wonders if she's going to dummy up now. (He'd like to be sure what side O'Neill's playing on, or even what sides are on the field.)

"You can do that. But they weren't at Nellis. And their orders didn't come through official channels."

"You know, right about now locking you in a room and telling Vance I've got an espionage case is sounding really good."

"Oh, yeah, I've always wanted to die for my country," she says. "Take this public, and whoever told you our guys were crooks... I don't know what's going on. I don't even know who's playing."

"You don't even know what sport we're playing."

Suddenly it's three years ago, and a conversation with Major Carter (another of O'Neill's darling girls, and doesn't it just fucking figure); he'd been trying to get her to read them in on the goddamn McAvoy case (and even now he wonders if they're ever going to get a single straight answer on that one). "I may not know the names on the jerseys anymore, but I bet I can guess the teams, so maybe you can at least give me a goddamn hint what's going on." And Major Carter had looked almost amused when she answered: "With respect, Agent Gibbs, to use your metaphor, you don't even know what sport we're playing. I'm sorry."

Gibbs doesn't know why he's surprised to be getting the same runaround now (same lies, different girl). O'Neill (and Hetty, mustn't forget their dear tyotia) made a religion out of keeping him in the dark back in the day. He was only there to shoot things, after all. And suddenly he's thinking of a generic conference room in Colorado and a man (O'Neill) and two women. One of them was Major Carter, and the other one was a civilian in glasses who spoke out of turn. Jackson, O'Neill called her. (Gibbs called her "Glasses Girl" in his head.)

This woman.

"Downstairs," he says. He's out of patience.

"No!" she says, and for the first time this entire morning, her words have the ring of unvarnished fucking honesty. "Please! Look, I-- I'll tell you what you want to know. I just don't know where to start." (Openness is often mistaken for truth, but this time he thinks he might be getting the real deal.)

"Start with O'Neill."

"I met him twelve years ago." A pause. "I'd just been fired from Berkeley. The Air Force hired me as a consultant to a top secret project."
"You?"

"They needed an archaeologist."

"Show me your hands."

His order startles both of them, but she complies, turning them palm-up on the table. He leans over her, finds what he expected to. "Gun calluses." (Gibbs really hates this game; he's hated it from the very beginning.)

"I, we, Jack, we were a … field team," she says, and the stammer is proof of layer on layer of secrets, and maybe none of them is the goddamn truth. "Became a field team. I retired last year."

Ten years at the war is a long time (a long fucking time, assuming little Dr. Jackson is telling the truth, and if she isn't yet, she's getting there). He'd played the Great Game full-time for five, and off-and-on for another fifteen, and the echoes of that are written in his bones.

"And O'Neill's in Washington, and here you are, and none if this is sounding like answers."

"A little over a year from now," she says heavily (wearily), "certain provisions in a secret treaty signed five years ago between the United States and twelve other countries will go into effect. At that time, certain stockpiles of information and technology held by the US government for over a decade must be disclosed to the signatories of the treaty and made available to them. We-- Jack's been getting rid of as much of it as he can before Disclosure. Ike and Jorge were doing what he told them to." Her voice is flat. She isn't looking at him. She isn't looking at much of anything. His gut tells him she's telling the truth.

"That doesn't seem very friendly, Dr. Jackson," he says, just to keep the conversation going. If you keep them talking, sometimes they'll keep telling you the truth, whether they mean to or not. (Besides, she already ruined his morning. He might as well return the favor.)

"I'm pretty sure it's …" she shrugs. "Treason," he supplies. "It's treason." If she wasn't planning to use that particular word, she should have. O'Neill's always had a rather loose interpretation of his oaths (spirit of the law rather than the letter; Hetty'd been that way too. They all lived in a different world back then).

""Treason"," she says bitterly. "Sure. Treason to keep the human race alive. Treason to keep us from destroying ourselves -- or being enslaved by monsters -- or... You know what? I don't really care what you think. It's easy to sit on the sidelines and second-guess the people who were there, and talk about God and America and all of that shit. And wrap yourself in the flag, and talk about the public's right to know. And then blow us all to hell. And -- oh god -- I used to care. But it's too late now. Jack was doing the right thing. And it isn't even that you're going to come in like some kind of lawyer and blow this open. It's that somebody already knows."

It's a pretty impressive display of temper. He lets it pass and concentrates on the (few and far between) facts. "There's a treaty. We have a stockpile. O'Neill's destroying it. Why?"

"Because the IOA is a pack of idiots," she snaps. "It's things nobody should have."

"Except us." He can't help prodding her.

That gets him her full attention (no more wide-eyed Southern bimbo; not anymore), and Gibbs isn't so sure he wants it. "Not even us. Especially not us." She sighs sharply, and her next words are delivered in the tones of a bored teacher lecturing the Special Ed kids.
"Once upon a time there was a secret government program. Very secret and critically short-staffed. And it collected a lot of things, and sent them to its secret lab at Area 51, but because it was so short-staffed, it was barely able to catalogue what it had." With her next words, her tone changes to something like sorrow. "We were fighting a war, you see. We were looking for weapons. And we won the war -- more or less -- and the Program's going public. And after Disclosure there'll be staffing, funding -- no need to come up with a good story to explain anything -- and everything we brought back will be in the hands of-- Of politicians, Agent Gibbs. Idiot bureaucrats. And if they get their hands on it... Everything I did, we did, won't matter."

It's a very pretty speech, but he already knows she's as good as O'Neill ever was at spreading the bullshit. "So O'Neill's been saving us from ourselves and got caught. Too bad."

"Are you really as stupid as you look, Agent Gibbs?" she asks (he guesses the gloves are off). "He didn't get caught. He got betrayed. And we don't know who did it. And that's why I'm here, actually. Because this is bigger than a few careers and a Beltway scandal. Jack said you'd never betray your country if you could help it," she stops short. Too much truth or too little; he's not sure which. "I need your help. I need to know why you picked up our guys. I need you to let them go -- make the case against them vanish. And I need anything you picked up with them."

"Because Jack says so," he says, letting his irritation show. "And I'm supposed to let two guys who broke into an armory in Kansas walk just for -- what? Old time's sake?"

"They. Were. Not. In. Kansas," Dr. Jackson says grimly. "They were tricked into leaving Area 51 with some of the most dangerous things in its inventory, and I want to know who did it and I want that stuff back."

He stares at her. Just for a moment, but he can't help himself. (Nice work, Gunny.) Put aside the Area 51 "secret stockpile" stuff (maybe bullshit, maybe not; he's seen plenty of weird shit in the last few years, including that ray gun Major Carter was packing at National), and they're still left with a couple of Marines who couldn't have been stealing shit in two places at once. The forensics put their two Marines at the crime scene in Kansas. Blood where one of them had been grazed by a bullet, a few hairs caught on a doorframe -- then again, Gibbs knows from long experience forensics can be faked (he did it himself once upon a time in a place called Russia), and O'Neill's people would never be that careless.

Forensics says they were there. Dr. Jackson says they weren't. He might as well admit he's never going to shake this headache. He doesn't want to ask the next question (there's always a next question). If (when) he does, he's pretty sure he'll get an answer, and there's only two possible answers here. Either she's lying to him or she's telling him the truth, and neither of those options is anything like good. (Hetty always did say sometimes the truth got in the way of the facts.)

"Please, Agent Gibbs," she says as the silence stretches. "I'll tell you anything. Everything. But I need--" She stops, looks surprised, laughs a little. Like she's only just now (finally) realized why she's here. "You said this was treason. If it is, I need you to help me commit treason, and I need to do it fast. Someone knows what we're doing, and there are only three candidates. None of them is good."

"Why don't you start there," he says (with commendable patience, all things considered) and just barely manages to keep from sighing and rubbing his temples. Vance on one side of him, O'Neill on the other, and he's here in the conference room talking treason with Archaeologist Barbie. If not for that mess with Farrow-Marshall that ended with Jenny's funeral, he'd say this was shaping up to be the worst week he's had since Russia. Doesn't matter (never has). He's still got an interrogation to conduct.
She pushes her glasses up and rubs her eyes again. It's a nervous gesture, and an old one (he remembers it from Colorado); in this one (tiny) respect, she's still a civilian even after all her time in Jack's raggle-taggle little army. And then she sings a song of sixpence, corruption, betrayal, and lies. Not hers of course; she says -- swears -- she's telling him the truth (he might be a hell of a lot more willing to believe her if she didn't show Hetty's teaching -- once removed -- so clearly; what Hetty taught her ducklings most of all was how to lie), and he wonders how much Dr. Jackson's word is worth. Those Marines sure as hell trusted her. (Then again, who the hell knows whose side Sgt. Croft and Sgt. Mundy are really on. They're sitting in I-1, after all, and if they weren't stealing stuff in Kansas, they were stealing it in Nevada. When you start trusting one suspect's opinion of another suspect, it's time to retire for damn sure.)

Dr. Jackson tells a hell of a story, he has to admit that. Maybe it's too much time hanging around Jack O'Neill. Maybe she's telling the truth (who the hell knows?). She says something called The Trust (originally a part of the NID -- that's the men in black vans; civilian oversight agency for certain black-budget military programs) wants to pry the secrets loose from military hands and incidentally enrich the private sector along the way: a sad tale, but a familiar one. The IOA (International Oversight Agency, and apparently they don't like to talk about just what it is they're overseeing; neither does Dr. Jackson) wants the secrets the government swore to give them and never meant to. That's simple espionage; as normal and as ordinary as pizza and beer. But then she gets to the third person peculiar in this Unholy Trinity ("yes, of course I'll try real bullets first") and suddenly they're off among alien body snatchers (just what this case needed: bad Sci-Fi movies). He really doesn't want to believe a single fucking word out of her mouth, except for the fact only a crazy person would try this kind of lie.

"--and we know The Trust had been infiltrated by a Goa'uld named Ba'al, but it turns out that wasn't a problem, because we had an agreement with Ba'al -- or so I found out last month -- and the snakes -- the Goa'uld -- are territorial, and all he wanted was to be left alone -- and sure, he was going to break the agreement eventually, but it bought us a little time -- only he got caught and executed, and that means it's open season again, and the Empire's pretty much gone, and Ba'al was the only one who liked Earth -- he wanted to wear it as a hat -- but we can't rule them out, and would you like the history of the Stargate program now? In case you can't read between the lines, this stockpile I'm talking about is alien technology. We brought it back from offworld. From other planets. It's dangerous. And I'm not asking you to trust me, but this would go faster if you asked questions. You can even tie me to a chair and hit me if you think you'll get better answers."

He'd love to get in her face, tell her she's lying, demand the real truth (not that he ever gets it), but the whole goddamn thing makes a sick sort of sense. Offworld. Overseas. Every time O'Neill used that word -- ever since the goddamn McAvoy case (the whole affair was classified before the ink was dry on his report, and they never got a single fucking answer about what had really happened) -- Gibbs has had the sense of truth elided. He never understood why. Now he hopes he doesn't (but his gut's pretty damn sure he does. Unfortunately).

"Dr. Jackson," he says. Whatever else she was going to say dies unspoken, and she looks up at him. "What do you want?" (He's probably not going to give it to her, but at least her answer might be informative.)

"World peace and a pony," she mutters under her breath. "I told you. Let our guys go. Give me everything you have on how and why they were picked up. I need all the …" She stops short. "What did they have on them when you picked them up?"

This at least seems to be a safe question (familiar territory, which is to say it doesn't have a single fucking thing to do with aliens). If the Marines really are O'Neill's (and Gibbs is pretty goddamn sure of that now), he won't be telling her anything she doesn't already know. Maybe he can trade
information she already has for the rest of her secrets and a little cooperation. If he plays his cards right.

"Not much. Couple of vials of some kind of liquid we can't identify and a flash drive my forensics tech says is heavily encrypted," he says. (Actually, Abby accused them of breaking her equipment.) It didn't seem like much, but they'd been willing to defend it with their lives.

"Where are they now?" she demands.

"Forensics. Evidence locker. My tech's been running tests." He glances at her face (she looks worried, and that worries him). "Don't worry, Dr. Jackson. Security here's tight, and Abby's careful. I guarantee the chain of evidence is still intact." For whatever goddamned case this actually is. (And why the fuck does he feel like he's just lied to her?)

Little Dr. Jackson's mouth twists wryly, and it's pretty fucking jarring to see the same goddamn funny-except-how-it's-not expression on her face that was one of O'Neill's trademarks. "Bet you a year's supply of coffee," she says, "that it's not."

The mockery in her voice is enough to make him take a couple of slow deep breaths and count to ten. He'd argue (defend Abby's virtue), except that when Dr. Jackson reaches for her coffee her hands are shaking and she bobbles the cup enough that if it were full it would spill. (Apparently the Theme of the Day is spilled coffee. Ha ha fucking ha. Someone really ought to outlaw Mondays.)

"Why don't we go see?" she asks, and there's a nasty edge in her voice that's going to piss him off if she keeps it up much longer.

He doesn't say anything. (Counts to ten again. In Russian this time. That makes him think of Hetty, which doesn't really help his temper. Great idea, Gunny.)

Dr. Jackson drains her coffee, gets to her feet, taps a few keys on her computer. "I really appreciate your taking the time to walk me through this, Agent Gibbs," she says, and they're back to purple flowers and Southern charm. Goody. "I know you must be very busy."

We are watched, her hands say (again), and she makes the signs so goddamn obvious she might as well be on the flight deck of a carrier signaling planes. He grits his teeth. (Remembers O'Neill: "Smile, Gunny: we're on Candid Camera!") It's not like he's forgotten there are fucking bugs in the conference room; Jesus Christ. He's pretty sure he might deserve sainthood for not snapping at her, and mentally adds it to her tab.

There's a sudden flurry of faux-purposeful activity as he and Dr. Jackson walk down the stairs and over to the elevator (no, not eavesdropping; not us). DiNozzo looks like he's expecting to see Gibbs dragging little Dr. Jackson by the hair (not that it isn't tempting). Ziva looks like she's thinking of offering backup. McGee is just staring at his computer in puzzlement, as if whatever's inside isn't playing nice. Gibbs waves them back to their seats before they're halfway out of them. (Sit, Ubu, sit.) They're not (thank fuck) blessed with another visit from Director Vance.

He glances at Dr. Jackson's face once the elevator doors slide shut. The lines around her mouth are grim.

#

"Gibbs!" Abby is eternally cheerful (in anyone else it would annoy him but he's always liked Abs. She makes him smile). "What are you doing back here?"

"I work here, Abs," he reminds her. Still, it's nice someone around here is happy to see him.
With a struggle, he remembers his manners. "Dr. Jackson, this is Abby Sciuto," he says. "Forensics."

Dr. Jackson (surprise) doesn't remember hers. She ignores both of them, opens her laptop, and starts typing furiously. Apparently there's something interesting about it, because Abby's watching her and grinning.

"Hey cool," Abby says. "What kind of encryption are you running?"

Gibbs is pretty sure that if he gives her half a chance, Dr. Jackson will answer Abby, and then there will be a lot of white noise followed by questions, followed by more white noise, so he jumps in before Dr. Jackson can open her mouth. "Abby, Dr. Jackson needs to take a look at the evidence we took off those Marines who did the McConnell break-in."

"But Gibbs!" Abby frowns (Abby almost never frowns), and gestures toward the evidence locker. "You already picked up the evidence this morning!" (It strikes him suddenly: where Dr. Jackson is opaque, Abby is transparent. Yin and yang.) "You signed the log and everything," Abby continues, looking at him sideways. She smiles suddenly, apparently having -- yet again -- reached the conclusion that Gibbs Works in Mysterious Ways. (He's always hoped she'll never have to learn to understand them.)

Keen on showing him her proof, Abby reaches around back of her computer and starts to brandish a much-used clipboard. Unfortunately for his peace of mind (not that he has much left after every other fucking thing that's happened this fucking morning), she stops mid-brandish and stares at it. "Wow, Gibbs, your handwriting looks really wrong. Did you drink too much coffee or something? Are you okay?"

(He was until just now. Mostly. Sort of.) He takes the keyboard gingerly (in his gut he's feeling echoes of every clusterfuck and near-miss that happened once upon a time in that other life the universe is apparently determined to not let him forget). He looks at the last line. His name, not his handwriting. Time listed as 8:10 AM, fifteen minutes before Dr. Jackson walked through the doors of NCIS and ruined his entire fucking day (let's be honest here: probably more like his entire fucking week).

"I was out front getting coffee at 8:10, Abs," he says carefully.

"Pay me," Dr. Jackson says almost brightly, and she's smiling-not-smiling and her eyes are hard. She presses her hands against her thighs, and Gibbs thinks they must still be trembling. (She's freaked out enough she's willing to let him see the cracks in her mask, and he doesn't like that one goddamn bit.)

Abby is wide-eyed and horrified. (She's shaking and her eyes are suddenly full of tears; he'd love to spare more time to feel bad for her, but his gut is telling him there's a tremendous goatfuck looming on the horizon.) Her mouth works for a moment before words emerge. "But Gibbs! It was you! You looked like you! You smelled like you! You brought me a Caf!Pow just like you!" She points. The Caf!Pow cup is sitting by her computer. Her usual size (the biggest). Usual flavor, too (cherry).

Abby likes to talk in paragraphs, so he's entirely unsurprised when she forges on. "You even asked for the evidence specifically. The vials and the flash drive. I would never, ever, ever have handed it over if you hadn't been you, I swear."

Dr. Jackson closes her eyes for a moment and breathes slowly. She's not the only one. (Not the worst fucking Monday of his entire life, but sure as shit this one's moved out of the top ten and into the top five.)

"This isn't your fault, Ms. Sciuto," Dr. Jackson says finally. She speaks slowly and carefully, like
she's trying to remember how to speak the English language. (Everything about this woman is a fucking mystery; he's starting to really hate it.)

"But this is my lab!" Abby protests.

"He bugged your lab." Dr. Jackson's voice is gentle (and just how many faces does this woman have?). "I'm jamming the signal, but--"

"Who? What? Where?" Abby's back to sputtering, but she pounces unerringly on Dr. Jackson's computer. She pokes it and the sine-wave becomes a small window in the corner. Now the screen shows Abby's lab. A single red point of light burns balefully in the green schematic. Abby swoops down on the indicated location before either of them can say a single fucking thing. (Dr. Jackson looks faintly stunned. That's all right; Abby has that effect on most people. And at least now Gibbs knows Dr. Jackson is human.) What Abby produces is a red, dome-shaped piece of plastic about the size of a silver dollar. It doesn't look like any bug Gibbs is ever seen (and he's seen plenty).

"Who did this?" Abby demands, in a voice promising wrath and thunderbolts.

That's when Dr. Jackson looks at him. Meets his eyes, and he can hear her plea as clearly as if she'd shouted it: oh please don't let anything happen to her. For just a second, it makes it pretty damn hard to keep hating little Dr. Jackson, O'Neill or no O'Neill.

"We'd all kind of like to know that, Abs," Gibbs says.

That's when Abby rounds on Dr. Jackson. "You!" she says accusingly. "You know what's going on!"

"I wish!" Dr. Jackson says feelingly (game on, and they're ready to play the second half). "We -- oh, hi, I'm with the NID, Dani Jackson, pleased to meet you, if I could just--"

She reaches for the bug, but Abby's already put it on her desk and smashed it. Dr. Jackson winces.

"How could Gibbs not be Gibbs?" Abby demands again.

"Well, actually, Ms. Sciuto, we know of several methods of performing this level of impersonation," Dr. Jackson says.

Abby blinks, arrested in mid-tirade. "Really?"

"Well, you may have heard of the Chimera system--"

"Yeah," Gibbs says. Dr. Jackson looks like she's gearing up for a long conversation; best to strike quickly and decisively. "It doesn't work."

"We back-engineered it so it wouldn't," Dr. Jackson snaps impatiently.

"But Gibbs wasn't a hologram," Abby protests. "He was carrying things, and, and, and -- and everything!"

Dr. Jackson looks profoundly unhappy. (Gibbs has been profoundly unhappy since little Dr. Jackson walked through the door this morning; he figures turnabout's fair play, even if his gut doesn't like this any better than she does.)

"Another one is a powerful short term hypnotic that increases--"

Gibbs never does find out what the hell it increases. "Drugged?" Abby demands. "I was drugged?"
"It's harmless," Dr. Jackson says. (Sure, except for letting the goddamn bad guys break into Abby's lab and steal shit.) "You see what someone wants you to see. It won't make you do anything you don't want to do."

"I handed over evidence!" Abby says. (Yeah, they've got that.)

"You thought it was Agent Gibbs," Dr. Jackson says soothingly. "He's allowed to take evidence out of here, isn't he?"

The look Abby gives him indicates that may change, if she has anything to say about the matter. "So which is it, Dr. Jackson?" he asks. "Drugs or holograms or something behind Door Number Three?"

Even with a twenty-ounce coffee from the good place, he really hates any fucking case that requires him to use hologram in a sentence and mean it. And now they're both giving him dark looks; great.

"It depends on how well whoever it is knows you, Ms. Sciuto," Dr. Jackson says.

"Abby," Abby corrects.

"Dani," Dr. Jackson answers, and they smile at each other. Possibly the most surreal moment of the entire fucking morning so far. (At least somebody is having fun.) "You say you saw Agent Gibbs. I don't know--"

"How do I know you're you now?" Abby demands. "Gibbs!"

Abby works miracles on a daily basis by thinking about five times faster than anyone Gibbs has ever met (except, he's thinking now, maybe little Dr. Jackson). Unfortunately, this means she has a tendency to check back in with the main conversation at intervals while she runs down her own questions.


Abby reaches out one finger and pokes him gingerly in the shoulder. "Okay, he's Gibbs," Abby says in relief. "But what if you aren't you?" she asks worriedly, glancing at Dr. Jackson. (Gibbs is starting to feel like he's living in one of those goddamn French films Jenny loved so much: the ones that had lots of melodramatic subtitles and didn't make one iota of fucking sense.)

"The hologram isn't stable for more than fifteen minutes, so whoever I am, I'm me, because I've been here all morning," Dr. Jackson tells her. (The part that worries Gibbs is that this makes sense to Abby.) "And that leaves drugs, so it's too damned bad this isn't the M--" and in that pause is infinite editing again. He's getting really goddamn sick of the things Dr. Jackson isn't saying. Whatever the hell they are; she's already told him about the fucking aliens, after all. "--that you don't have security cameras in here," Dr. Jackson finishes. "Because then we'd know who was here."

"Oh, but I totally do!" Abby says cheerfully (and this really shouldn't surprise him; Abby guards her domain like a sweet-natured but rabid pit-bull). "Here! I'll show you!" It should surprise him even less that all of her cameras are somehow hooked up to her computer (sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from voodoo). Abby's fingers clatter over the keyboard, and she babbles cheerfully to Dr. Jackson (Dani) about high definition and wireless and viewing the room from multiple angles and how she wishes she could have managed to install infrared so she'd have night vision too but it was way too expensive, and Gibbs is amused to note this all apparently sounds like white noise to Dr. Jackson too, for all she's smiling and nodding.

Abby takes a breath to continue just as the little timer in the bottom right hand corner of the window
ticks over to 08:04:45. She closes her mouth on another solid stream of technobabble as the video shows the lab doors sliding open.

There are a lot of things in this world that gripe his gut. One of the big ones is seeing impossible things. The lab camera shows him a blond guy walking in with a spray-can in one hand (no label; that'd be too goddamn easy) and a Caf!Pow in the other. (Which, okay, could happen: there's always some asshole trying to get on Abby's good side in the wrong way. But what can't happen is what happens next.) Abby turns around with her Wrath of Abs expression on. Blondie sprays her in the face with whatever he's got. Then he hands her the Caf!Pow. Suddenly Abby's all smiles. She hugs Blondie. What the fucking fuck?

There's no sound on the footage, but he can read lips (another gift from dear Aunt Hetty). **Gibbs! What are you doing here this early?** I-- At that point Abby hits cruising speed -- approximately Mach 2 -- and he's missing most of it. He can fill in the blanks from what he sees, though. He watches Abby dash around her lab, gathering up the evidence. While her back is turned, Blondie reaches into his pocket and pulls out the bug and stashes it. Abby hands Blondie the clipboard (he signs) and then the evidence (looking puzzled but trusting), and then Blondie walks out again at 08:11:23.

"Well, hell," Dr. Jackson says, and her voice is completely flat.

Another thing his gut doesn't like is hearing that tone of voice from someone like little Dr. Jackson. Who isn't southern and who's (probably) not an idiot. (Jury's still out on the "bitch" part.) For just a second, Dr. Jackson drops her mask, and he sees the same look he saw on Hetty's face after Sofia died -- was murdered, let's be honest -- in a dingy little alley in Leningrad. Shock. Grief. Rage.

Out of the corner of his eye (his attention is still riveted on Dr. Jackson; some revelation is at hand and he better not blink) he sees Abby drain the last of her Caf!Pow (of course she wouldn't waste it, and it's not like it doesn't already have her prints all over it) and slip the cup into an evidence baggie.

"Mr. Not-Gibbs touched this. I need to print it!" Abby declares.

"No you don't," Dr. Jackson says, and her voice is soft and colorless now. "I know him. I knew him. He's dead."

For just a second Gibbs thinks she means that the man who came to Abby's lab died this morning (there would have just been time for Dr. Jackson to shoot him before she arrived), but of course his life's not that easy. (One look at the non-expression on Dr. Jackson's face is enough to tell him that.)

"Scott. Allen Scott. Major, commanding--" Dr. Jackson stops, and he expects another editorial side-slip, but apparently she can't figure out what words to substitute, so she lapses into silence for a second (that's interesting). She finally starts up again. "His team went MIA four years ago. We never saw any of them again. Not even rumors. After-- So, KIA. He shouldn't be here."

"Well, not if he's dead," Abby says with mild reproof. "But see? He isn't." She looks at both of them, squints. "Only I guess that isn't so good, with him sneaking in here like this, huh?" She puts a hand on Dr. Jackson's arm. Dr. Jackson (Dani) startles as violently as if she'd forgotten Abby was in the room.

"They don't come back after four years," Dr. Jackson says.

"Where don't they come back from, Dr. Jackson?" Gibbs asks, as gently as he can, because just now Dr. Jackson (he'd have said "unflappable Dr. Jackson" right up until just about five minutes ago)
looks like she's either going to burst into tears or \textit{start screaming}.

"Overseas," she says, and her voice is distant. "They don't come back from overseas, Agent Gibbs."

"Overseas," and he knew at the time (Trent Kort, National, and Major Carter with a fucking ray gun) "overseas" meant something else, and now he knows it means \textit{Outer Space}, but he doesn't have the whole story yet. (Needs it. Doesn't want it.)

"People come back from--" Abby says. "Hey," she says, worried, peering at Dr. Jackson. "Hey?"

O'Neill called it the Court of Miracles because that was what you learned there. He's taught her well: Dr. Jackson takes a deep breath and smiles. ("Smile for the cameras, Gunny," O'Neill's voice says in memory). Smoke and mirrors and misdirection: O'Neill's stock in trade, and (apparently) Dr. Jackson's too. Doesn't need to fool anyone (not really) so long as it minimizes the damage. "Oh wow," she says. "They sure aren't kidding about breakfast being the most important meal of the day: you know, I stopped at McDonald's on the way here and then I got so hung up in traffic I never ate. Another minute and you'd have been picking me up off the floor."

"Run the prints anyway, Abs," he says. "We need proof."

Abby nods determinedly. "I will get right on that. Right away. I will go and I will run these prints and-- I am so sorry! Maybe he's being blackmailed! He could be being blackmailed, right Gibbs?"

"No," Dr. Jackson says, reluctantly (regretfully). He can see the wheels turning behind her eyes; he's pretty sure she's weighing choices and not seeing any good ones (he also has the frustrating feeling she'd say more if Abby wasn't here). "He might come back. There's a chance he might come back."

Gibbs feels his hackles rise. If Major Scott (Dead Guy walking) strolls back in here again, they're fucked, because everyone will see just exactly what he wants them to see.

"Hey, Abby," Dr. Jackson says. "Could you do something for me? If it's okay with Agent Gibbs?"

"Sure," Abby says with a blink. She glances back and forth between them, worrying.

"Could you wear this?" Dr. Jackson's unclasping the pendant around her neck (it's large, oval. Flowers. Not really Abby's style. Gibbs'd figured it was part of Dr. Jackson's disguise). Dr. Jackson turns it over, and now he can see it's actually painted rubber. There's a slit in the back like one of those little rubber coin purses. Dr. Jackson squeezes it carefully, and Gibbs can see two glass tubes: one blue, one yellow. "The glass is very fragile," Dr. Jackson says. "If you break the tubes, their contents will combine to form a gas. It won't hurt you. It will stop Major Scott."

""Stop"...?" Abby says.

"He'll fall down and go into convulsions," Dr. Jackson tells her. "You should go get Gibbs when that happens."

"Why would he do that?" Abby wants to know (frankly, so does Gibbs; though he figures he isn't going to like the answer: probably more \textit{overseas} shit. He's starting to get sick of it all over again). "And what if I think he's \textit{Gibbs}?"

"You should break the glass if there's any doubt," Dr. Jackson says. She sounds resigned, like she's done this about a million times. Gibbs doesn't like what that implies. "Scott was exposed to a chemical agent." (This has the ring of bullshit, Jack O'Neill style). "This reacts with it. That's why it's harmless unless you're him."
"Well I'm not," Abby says firmly. She looks at Gibbs. He doesn't know exactly what Dr. Jackson's magic potion does (he thinks it kills, thinks she walked in here wearing a weapon she thought would work -- who she thought it would work on is probably a question best left unasked), but for what it's worth, he's pretty damn sure she's on their side. (He kind of wishes she weren't.)

What he really wishes (not for the first time, and almost certainly not for the last) is that Jenny were still here. She was far better suited to swimming in these waters than Gibbs'd ever been. But Jenny's dead (and someday he might be able to think those words without wincing inwardly; today's not that day) and when all you have to hand is a hammer, a hammer's what you use. (O'Neill taught him that, and he wants to think about O'Neill just about as much as he wants to think about Hetty.)

He nods at Abby, who's still looking at him concernedly. "Better safe than sorry, Abs."

Abby smiles shakily, clasps the ribbon around her neck, no doubt thinking of Dead Guy (maybe a zombie, maybe something worse) returning to her lab with worse things on his mind than stealing evidence. Gibbs is thinking it too, and the idea makes his jaw clench. He knows he's made his decision (what the hell; may as well go all in), but he's not keen on saying the words (and Jack said you wouldn't betray your country, not if you could help it. But what if the best way not to betray your country was to commit treason? He'd always hated these kinds of fucking puzzles). He isn't really surprised to hear himself tell Abby to hand over her reports and her samples (and everything Dead Guy missed) to Dr. Jackson.

"I think maybe I better make sure Dr. Jackson gets that breakfast she missed," he says, playing along (second round bell's rung, and this time they're playing for keeps).

She's still ashen, but she nods, and then her desktop is back to purple flowers (he's really going to hate those purple flowers by the time this case is over; he's almost sure of it) and she's back to smiling and she's closing up her laptop and tucking it back into her case.

"Goodbye, Dani!" Abby calls after them. Dr. Jackson turns back, smiles (it looks genuine) and waves. Upstairs, she retrieves her briefbag and her reams of paper (window dressing) and gun (he's willing to bet she's as good with it as anyone on his team) and bids everyone a distracted goodbye (which is a whole lot of bullshit; she's not distracted at all, and she'll be back).

"Are you sure you'll be able to find your car, Dr. Jackson?" he asks. No harm in giving some more credence to her camouflage; they might need it later.

She shakes her head no, and her eyes are smiling. (Well played, Gunny. He's not sure if it rankles or not. He'll worry about it later.)

In the elevator he hits the "Stop" button. "Get me an explanation I can give Vance and I'll let your men go," he says.

"The aliens," she says, and it takes him a minute to catch up. "The Goa'uld. I think one of them's in Scott."

He takes a deep breath but she's already punched the "Go" button and the elevator's moving again. He sees her out the front door and off on her way. (Back home to O'Neill; he'd be willing to bet. He hopes she'll be as much fun for O'Neill as she's been for him.)

#

When Gibbs strolls back through the metal detector, Ziva's waiting for him on the other side. She doesn't look happy. That makes two of them. Treason, government conspiracies, body-snatching
space aliens, and while Dr. Jackson hasn't quite managed to swear him to secrecy, for now he thinks (even though he hates the thought of it) it's better to keep his team in the dark. He knows they'd all commit treason for his sake or on his order, and some orders shouldn't ever be given. (He learned that from Hetty too. The hard way.)

So she says "Gibbs," and he says "Ziva," and he has about two minutes to figure out how to play this as they make their way upstairs.

"Dr. Jackson thinks we got the wrong guys," he says once the gang's all there. (McGee looks like he's swallowed a live frog, which Gibbs is willing to bet means McGee knows their evidence walked, and it would be really fucking nice if McGee kept his damn mouth shut for more than five minutes at a time. That isn't fair to McGee, but right now Gibbs doesn't give a crap.)

Ziva snorts, DiNozzo looks like he's trying really hard to believe the nice lady with the big blue eyes and having a hard time of it, and McGee looks worried. "We've got--" McGee says, and Gibbs pins him with a look, because the last thing he wants to hear right now (and probably for the rest of the fucking week) is any sentence containing the word "evidence.'

"And because we always cooperate with other agencies on request," he continues (it's bitch or go blind; some days that isn't much of a choice), "I thought we could review the evidence from McConnell ourselves." (Just in case he isn't the only one O'Neill's been lying to.)

There's a moment of respectful silence.

"We could check their records, see if they've reported any other break-ins," DiNozzo suggests. DiNozzo's suspicious nature occasionally surfaces, but that's not going to be enough to save him, not after this morning's performance.

"You could go out there and interview the people involved," Gibbs corrects him. "I want their security footage from the night of the break-in. I want their inventory records."

"That's … gonna take a lot of time, Boss," Tony says, swallowing.

Gibbs smiles. "Yeah, DiNozzo, it is. That's why you're taking Ziva with you. To help."

Ziva gives him a dark, narrow-eyed look. She doesn't say a damn thing, but that only means she's waiting until she can get him alone: apparently her suspicions that he's been brainwashed or compromised or maybe just dropped on his head by the good Dr. Jackson don't bear sharing with the rest of the class (yet).

"McGee, I want those Marines' service records. And see what you can find out about Dr. Jackson and the National Intelligence Department. Quietly."

"Sure, Boss," McGee says. (Gibbs knows in a few hours McGee will have information for him, and Gibbs will carefully Not Ask where it came from. O'Neill's going to owe him a hell of a lot more than a thank-you and an annual Christmas card when this lovely little goatfuck is all over.) He's played a lot of hands close to the vest (Mike was never a big fan of telling the higher-ups what he was doing, and Gibbs can't fault him there), but this is an even older game than the one Mike taught him. He doesn't care for it.

After that, there's nothing to do but go down to I-1 to spend a frustrating hour with Croft and Mundy (he moves Mundy into I-2; and sticks DiNozzo with him; McGee's busy on more important things, and Ziva's making arrangements to go to Bumfuck Egypt). Neither Marine has anything to say (he finishes up early and spends a few minutes watching DiNozzo give Mundy his best shot). No
surprises there, but not interrogating them would look too suspicious, all things considered.

When he and DiNozzo are done getting nowhere, he sends the Marines back to Lockup (they'll stay put -- after all, Dr. Jackson told them to), and heads out for his fourth coffee of the day (he's not really sure any amount of coffee can improve this day, but some habits are hard to break). He isn't really surprised to find Ziva laying in wait for him in that out-of-the-way corner by the stairwell. It's the same place DiNozzo goes to have "private" cell phone conversations, and one of these days Gibbs is going to have to tell DiNozzo the only one he's fooling is himself. Still, it's one of the few places Vance can't easily see from on high and the acoustics really suck. Whatever they say here won't carry far, and what does get out should be so distorted it might as well be a Beatles song played backward. (Ziva's a smart girl.)

"I thought you did not trust her," Ziva hisses. There's no need to specify which "her" Ziva means. Right now there's only one that matters. Ziva looks really fucking furious (of course she's furious; he's just sent her off to Kansas where all the steaks come from and away from a woman who reads to her as Imminent Threat.)

"I don't trust her," he says, keeping his voice down. Shitty acoustics and relative privacy are no excuse for shouting. It's even sort of true (yes, no, maybe). Working from first principles, Dr. Jackson is the sort of woman who shouldn't be trusted (then again, so is Ziva). Ziva is unconvinced. (Ziva is terminally unconvinced. Normally it's one of the things Gibbs loves about her. Right now it's just a pain in his ass.)

"Then why did you not arrest her?" Ziva demands.

"Our evidence was stolen from the evidence locker this morning, Ziva," he says wearily. He doesn't go into details (probably a good idea since he's currently calling their chief suspect Dead Guy), waves off her "what, how?" with a "we're investigating" that he's pretty sure Ziva ain't buying. "I know you don't like this. Neither do I. But Dr. Jackson insists those Marines are being framed. Maybe she's lying, maybe not." He shrugs like his gut doesn't already know the answer to that one. "Go to Kansas. Look at the evidence. Find me something." (And please God, whatever DiNozzo and Ziva find out there in the Land of Steaks, let this goddamn case be over soon.)

Ziva gets a thoughtful look, and Gibbs spares a moment to hope it's a "I'm going to make DiNozzo's life miserable" thought and not an "I'm going to check with some of my old friends and see what I can find out about Dr. Jackson and the NID" look. "Just don't take any wooden elephants," Ziva says gravely.

Gibbs doesn't even bother to try to untangle the sentence (Ziva's one unfailing optimism is in her ability to someday master American vernacular). He already knows what it means. Don't get killed while I'm not here to watch your back.

It isn't even noon yet.

#

O'Neill isn't paying a lot of attention in the morning meeting (fair's fair, they're ignoring him). For one thing, it's pointless (the meeting; his paying attention is debatable); for another, he's attended the exact same meeting roughly every six weeks since he got dragged to DC three endless years ago. Bottom line: Disclosure's in fourteen months and what do we tell the children? (The International Stargate Treaty seemed like a great idea at the time, but that was an Administration ago; Hayes is a lame duck this term and the vultures are gathering for the 2012 elections. It's anybody's guess what effect Disclosure will have on them, but that doesn't mean people don't try.)
He's been accused (by pretty much everyone who's ever known him) of not being a political animal. Fair enough, but he isn't stupid either. JCOS or Select Oversight Committee (the saber-rattling and graveyard whistling sound just the same), he makes them nervous because he's been to see the elephant. And now they all want to make sure of him (stone cold dead hath no fellow), and reassure themselves General O'Neill is a team player, because they also know that the moment the horse is out of the barn, he'll have more clout than they do -- on the Hill, in the House, on Nightline, whatever battleground you choose. The dashing military leader on the frontlines of America's Secret War.

(He really needs to thank Bregman some time.)

Skippy's First Rule of Victory is "get there first with the most men". What his brothers in arms and duly-elected representatives don't know is he's been working on Disclosure for years. It's still going to be a goatfuck, but Earth will probably survive it. Or would, if he gets to finish his housekeeping. It isn't that he thinks Gibbs is the enemy (yes and no); what Gibbs is, is a royal pain in the ass: he's always been a tactical thinker, not a strategic one, an NCO in his bones. But they can't have the curtain going up on the dog-and-pony show just yet. So he loaded Dani up with smoke and mirrors and sent her off to ... be a peaceful explorer.

He's trying not to worry about her, because he's (pretty) sure Gibbs isn't going to shoot her. But SG-1 is history, and he hasn't sent his cultural specialist off to the wars, he's sent his girlfriend.

He's not quite sure how it's different, or what's different, or if anything should be. They both have desk jobs. In beautiful theory, he's no longer allowed to give her orders (in beautiful theory she followed them, back in the day). Things aren't all that different from the way they've been since the day a few years back when he went to work and got grabbed by a headsucker and woke up three months later as an Asgard battleship and along the way she got impatient and he gave up lying to both of them. It just seems different (he supposes) because when you stop fooling yourself you see the truth by default.

And he doesn't want to see her hurt, and he doesn't want to be the one who survives, and today's sortie into "lying to members of our fellow government agencies" isn't that dangerous, but there are things on the horizon that are. (So far they're both dealing with that by pretending those things don't exist. It will work for a while.)

He's telling himself encouragingly that the most dangerous thing she has to deal with today is the traffic, but she was supposed to hit the Yards by eight and be out by nine and she should have been back before he was out of that meeting. It's one-thirty when he finally hears her in the outer office; just enough time to sweep his (untouched) Taco Bell into the wastebasket and rearrange his expression before she's through the door.

He's still not entirely sure where she dug up the outfit. Lacy blouse and flowered skirt and a cute little jacket that's about as unprofessional as a jacket can get. Her hair's still sun bleached from her vacation at Mitchell's place, and longer than usual because she can't just go to her usual barber and Carter broke her of the habit of cutting it herself a few years in. She's doing a pretty good job of channeling "egghead ditz" just now.

She never used to be able to lie. She's learned along the way. Mostly by indirection (an excellent method; Saint Hetty would approve.) Then she closes the door behind herself, and stops, and smiles at him radiantly. And her hands move (her gestures are slow and dramatic: so obvious they make him want to wince) (but it hasn't been a language of secrets for a very long time).

The enemy has made our position. Our communications are not secure.

"And how was your morning, Jack?" she asks.
The first rule of victory (in life, in war) is to act, not react. *(You ask, I answer, I win. Quoth the Gospel of Saint Hetty.)* So he leans casually back in his chair, and smiles, and opens the drawer with the little lump of pale glass in it. Paperweight. Keepsake. *(Certainly not a piece of alien technology so secret and so powerful there isn't a government on Earth that wouldn't want to order them by the gross.)* He turns it on, and the little blue and orange lights inside start blinking. It still doesn't look like anything much.

"Same old, same old," he says. "Yours?"

The smile's faded. She comes over and sits on the edge of his desk. Picks up the Asgard jammer. "You could have told me you knew Special Agent Gibbs," she says.

"The MacAvoy thing," he says (although she knows it, she was there).

"Apparently earlier," she says, still in that mild tone of random observation. "And while I'm not asking for details, it was somewhere he learned our hand signals. That made it really difficult to keep up the idiot act when he saw me down in the interrogation room making rude hand gestures at Ike and Jorge."

He doesn't say anything. He knows his office is bugged, which means the longest they can run the jammer safely here is fifteen minutes. And she'd be bitching louder and hotter if the worst thing that had happened this morning was getting tagged by Gibbs. *(That's a problem, but they'll deal with it.)*

"So Agent Gibbs beat me up, I briefed him on the Stargate Program, he told me Ike and Jorge are being held as suspects in a break-in to an armory in Kansas, anonymous tip -- Leon says "hi" by the way; I ran into him while I was there -- but that's not the fun part. No. I found out another old friend of ours had stopped by the same morning. I just missed him."

She's staring out the window over his shoulder now. Her face is still and expressionless, and he feels his gut knot. It's never been in the same league as Gunny's as a shitstorm early-warning detector, but if the storm is big enough, any instrumentation will pick it up.

"You remember Major Scott, Jack, right? Marine?"

"Disappeared with the rest of SG-5 back in '04," he answers, and he doesn't want to think about where this is going.

"He walked into NCIS headquarters this morning, dosed their forensic tech with the Reole chemical, and walked out with everything our guys had been carrying. She had him on tape. She thought he was Agent Gibbs." She takes a deep breath. "They're back. Goddammit, Jack. It was bad enough to make a deal with one of them in the first place. But it didn't work."

He's not going to refight the Ba'al thing with her again. "Are you sure he was snaked?"

She looks at him now. She's angry, but that's because she's scared. Once upon a time there'd been four strangers who walked through a magic door (it didn't go to Narnia or even to Oz) to play a game of cowboys and monsters. And the game was worth playing, because it was for the safety of Earth and everyone any of them had ever loved. And back then it was a simple game with simple rules, because there were cowboys on one side, and monsters on the other, and it was easy to tell who the monsters were.

He was the only one who'd known that part of the game was a lie, because he'd spent time being a monster himself, and he knew they weren't stashed all safely on other planets. That was the part he tried hard to keep any of the others from finding out, especially her. Because if the monsters were
everywhere, so was the war. And one thing he'd learned through the years (year after year, war after war) was that if you couldn't come home from the war, sooner or later it would break you.

And that was something none of them could afford, and neither could Earth. Only they were walking the road to Hell, and good intentions didn't matter. It wasn't long at all before his cowboys (and cowgirls) found out nothing was neat and nothing was labeled, and that sometimes the monsters didn't wear meatsuits. Sometimes the monsters were the meatsuits.

And the worst part of it all was, those were the monsters you had to pretend not to see.

"I didn't ask him. But considering everything you haven't been telling me, maybe you have a better candidate?"

She'd known Ba'al was captured on Earth. She'd never known the details. Not until this morning. Set a thief to catch a thief, and leaving Ba'al and Farrow-Marshall untouched had been a devil's bargain. He hadn't made it himself (yes and no and that's one of the many things he doesn't think about) but he'd let it stand, and he'd only managed to sleep at night by telling himself: better the devil you know.

Well, the Free Jaffa had fucked that one up royally. But he'd still hoped. Most of the snakes were dead, and the Lucian Alliance wanted to hand Earth its head on a plate, but so far he's been one jump ahead of the agents they send here, and the one upside to the Alliance existing at all is that it's more than happy to hunt down the snakes wherever it finds them.

Apparently they missed some.

"They'll identify him," he says, and she smiles again.

"I already told them who he… was."

If this weren't his end-run around the Apocalypse, the next stop would be a matter for a full debrief, the kind they do in the secure rooms that he knows aren't. He still needs all the details, and they'll probably lead to unpleasant conversations with Gibbs and a lot of interdepartmental saber-rattling. But at least her part in this is over. He'll find some deniable way to leak the information about Scott into the official record. But tracking him down -- whoever he is now -- is somebody else's job. There's just one more thing to cover while they're here under the rose.

"While you were doing all that disclosing, did you get NCIS to let our guys go?" Burying the whole thing is probably off the table now.

"Agent Gibbs said to bring him proof they weren't in Kansas last week. They'll sit tight until we do."

He turns off the jammer and puts it in his pocket. "--so let's go grab some lunch. I'll even pay," he says, as if they've been talking all along. Systems malfunction all the time. Universal belief in the innate perversity of machines has saved his ass more than once.

"Sure," she says, but he can tell she isn't here with him.

She's already back at the war.

#

The bullpen is quiet in the absence of the Ziva and DiNozzo show. McGee renders Gibbs's day truly joyous by telling him the NID is the civilian oversight organization for military black programs (matches what Dr. Jackson told him, and she came in waving credentials that anyone watching her would expect him to check), and providing a heavily-redacted file on Dr. Danielle Jackson, currently
an analyst with the Aristarchus Institute. (What she's analyzing, and what the Aristarchus Institute is, are things apparently better left to the imagination, and its interesting that her cover doesn't go this far down; he's pretty sure the NID credentials were just to get her through the door, and if their director is willing to do her (O'Neill) a favor like that, it gives Gibbs some idea of the weight class he's punching in.) Apparently Dr. Jackson's last job (1997-2009) was as a cryptanalyst with something called Deep Space Telemetry in Colorado Springs--

("We were a field team.")

--and before that, nothing much.

Abby spoils his lunch by running down Dead Guy's prints by 11:45. Major Allen Michael Scott. Force Recon, from the days back when it meant something. Sting Ray ops, and there weren't a lot of officers boots on the ground in Force to begin with. Disappeared into the wilds of Buttfuck, Colorado in 1998, and six years later he was listed MIA (still in Colorado; that's damn interesting) and seven years later KIA, and today he walked into NCIS and brought Abby a Caf?Pow and she handed him the keys to the kingdom. (If he hadn't known this case was a goddamn Jack O'Neill special before, he'd sure as hell know it by now.) There's not a lot to see in Major Scott's record between '98 and '04 except "classified" ("...they don't come back from overseas..."), but Gibbs tells Abby to run facial recognition anyway; at least they might be able to trace Dead Guy's movements. He and his fucking hoodoo spray may be able to lie to people's faces, but apparently they can't lie to a camera.

This goddamn case has Gibbs thinking of the end of the thing in Leningrad (the second thing; Leningrad was bad fucking juju), goatfuck after clusterfuck after near miss and stupid fucking mistake. Mostly he remembers telling O'Neill over the sound of gunfire (it was a goddamn miracle neither of them left that warehouse with a bullet hole or four), "Jesus Christ, some days we just can't catch a break." (O'Neill laughed and said: "Some days?")

He sends McGee out for sandwiches (mainly so he doesn't have to listen to the wheels in McGee’s head turn), and while he's gone, Vance's secretary summons him into the Presence (he never thought he'd miss Cynthia, but she was one of the casualties of the New Broom policy).

And it's "Gibbs" and "Director" and a bit of awkward small talk (Vance wants to know how Gibbs knows Dani; Gibbs doesn't say he doesn't think he's met her yet) and then they get down to brass tacks. Vance gently suggests that if the McConnell case is actually espionage, they should tie it up with a big blue ribbon and hand it over to Langley. Gibbs narrowly refrains from gently suggesting Director Vance can kiss his ass, and says the case still looks like weapons trafficking to him. (And why Langley and not the NID?) There's the usual crap about "overreaching our authority", and Gibbs says he's sent David and DiNozzo out to McConnell to confirm jurisdiction.

Lunch sucks. And about the time he's thinking of another coffee run the phone rings again.

"Gibbs." (McGee is the only one in earshot, and McGee -- unlike DiNozzo -- does not feel the need to make everybody's business his. Most of the time.)

"Jethro. It's lovely to hear your voice again."

"What do you want, Kort?"

Trent Kort: MI6, CIA, professional backstabber. Gibbs has known the Alphabet Boys have dirty hands and sticky fingers since before he left the Corps. The fact Kort still has a desk at Langley just proves it.
"Is that any way to treat an old friend?" Kort actually manages to sound hurt.

"We aren't friends."

McGee looks up. Gibbs glares. Not McGee's fault, but life isn't fair. There's a beat of silence before Kort gets back in the game. "Oh, one can never have too many friends, Jethro. They help a lad get on in life. Why, right now -- in a friendly way -- I'm willing to save you hours of tedium finding out one of your cases isn't NCIS business."

"Was there an actual reason you called?" He's trying for long-suffering instead of incandescently pissed (nails it, go him). He already knows what this is about.

"Those two Marines you have in gig -- can I say "alleged Marines", or am I giving too much away too soon? -- are persons of interest to the Agency. It's an ongoing case. I'm sure you won't mind passing them on to us. Spirit of interagency cooperation, and all that."

"Gee, you know how much we love cooperating around here," Gibbs says. "But the only Marines I've got are going down for weapons trafficking. Nothing Langley would be interested in."

"Now, Jethro," Kort says, like he's talking to a backward child.

"Hey, I don't run this place," Gibbs snaps. "You want my Marines? Fine. You take it up with Director Vance. Until then, this is an NCIS case."

"I suppose that's your final word on the subject?" Kort's doing the regretful veiled threat. Nothing new there.

"Say goodbye, Kort."

He's pretty sure life can't get any better when DiNozzo checks in a few hours later from the Land of Steaks.

"What do you got, DiNozzo?" He doesn't know whether he wants to know or not, but he sent them out there to get answers.

"Well, we only just got here, Boss, so we haven't gotten to everything you wanted us to look at." DiNozzo sounds whipped; Gibbs wonders how hard a time Ziva gave him about Dr. Jackson (specifically) and his (stupid) tendency to trust pretty girls who flirt with him (in general), and the likelihood his behavior would get him (in the best-case scenario) stripped naked and thrown in jail in Tijuana. "But," DiNozzo continues, "we maybe have something. Ziva said we oughtta start by looking at the security videos at the main entry gate and comparing them against the entry log."

"Today." Apparently McGee's habit of taking forever to get to the damn point is contagious.

"Right, Boss. So anyway, both the visitor's log and the guy manning the gate say General Bradford - - he's in charge of some project or other--" (nice and specific, DiNozzo) "--and two aides stopped by here at 4:30 PM on the day of the break-in. Funny thing is, General Bradford's service file says he's 65 years old and bald, but the dude on the tape was more like mid-30s with a blond buzzcut. Had a couple of other guys with him, but we couldn't get a good look at them on the security video."

Gibbs thinks instantly of Dead Guy. (If Dead Guy was in Kansas, Doctor Jackson wasn't just blowing smoke up his ass. And here he thought this weird damn day couldn't get any fucking worse.) DiNozzo's not done yet. "Showed the video to the guard and he seemed really confused about the whole thing, but I figure he's just trying to protect his job because I honestly don't see how anyone could be that stupid."
"Get a copy of it," Gibbs snaps. (Just on the off chance there are two blond buzzcuts wandering through this fucking case.) "Run down Bradford and find out where he was last Thursday. I want proof. Check the armory inventory. Statement from the guard. We're on the clock, DiNozzo."

Weren't when he sent them to Flyover Country, but that was before Langley started sniffing around. (Time was NCIS didn't just roll over when Langley barked: times have changed. Goddammit he misses Jenny.)

"Right, Boss." DiNozzo sounds resigned to pulling an all nighter. Good. He wants them back here as soon as he can get them. Sooner.

Preferably with a fucking case.

In subtle revenge (just doing my job, Boss), DiNozzo hands the phone over to Ziva, who makes a point of telling him the guy on the tapes matches Dead Guy's description (of course it does; this week already fucking sucks and it's only Monday). The things Ziva doesn't tell him he can work for himself: she thinks Blond Buzzcut (Dead Guy) is working with the guys Dr. Jackson is trying to spring; she thinks the guard might lie to DiNozzo but wouldn't lie to her (few people lie to Ziva David for very long). He tells her to find out everything she can.

Trouble is (the trouble there's been with this goddamned case all along, from the moment they picked up Croft and Mundy and made them turn out their pockets), if you break into an armory, stuff's got to go somewhere. A plane, a train, a truck, a ship, into the black market (domestic), into the even blacker market (foreign), and there's no money in it being a one-off job, and it's got to involve an inside man (usually some sergeant in Requisitions who thinks he's underappreciated and underpaid). There's not a goddamn thing about this case that matches that profile. (By now he doesn't think it should, but if Dead Guy and his associates the Bad Guys were this fucking sloppy setting up their cover, it tells him their op -- whatever the hell it is -- is on a short fuse. Or run and done, and that's probably worse.)

When he hangs up the phone and looks up, Vance is watching him.

#

O'Neill takes Dani to a quiet (expensive) Georgetown watering hole for a leisurely lunch while he gets chapter and verse and chorus hallelujah. He's pretty sure Gibbs isn't going to run to the papers with his new view of reality, and Dani made the only choice she could once Gibbs connected her with him. (That or a prison term, and she'd known she had to get the intel out.) He should have told her Gibbs could follow the Team handsignals (hope for success and plan for failure) but the plan had rested on her getting to pass her message unobserved. Just dumb bad luck they were already in Interrogation instead of off in their nice cozy cells. (No plan of battle survives first contact with the enemy.)

That leaves them with the cold hard facts.

Fact: someone who shouldn't knows about their little gang of thieves. Fact: someone has spoofed their secure communications channels to get some of the Good Stuff out in the open where it would be easy to snatch. Fact: someone framed Croft and Mundy and then tipped NCIS off.

Fact: the man who walked into NCIS and made off with the baby went MIA four years ago, and now he's back. They'd never even heard of the Lucians when Scott's team vanished, and the Alliance doesn't turn their people when it catches them, it kills them. (Sometimes it sends pictures; it's nice to be loved.)

Fact: a Lucian agent could have just broken into Area 51 and skipped the fan-dance.
Conjecture: the snakes are back in town.

He goes back to the office and passes this gem of information along to Carter (encrypted channels with cut outs and double backs, slower than molasses), who still can't find out where they were tapped and spoofed. At least she can join the hunt for whoever's wearing Al Scott. She promises to get him the paper trail that'll spring their guys; if he's feeling particularly uncharitable he can have Irene deliver it.

He gives Barrett a heads-up next (professional courtesy). It's going to be the Niddies who are boots on the ground for this snake-hunt, and that sucks, because the Department may be free of alien influence these days (they can always hope) but the rank and file have always been a bunch of sleazy opportunists.

He wishes he could call up T and ring him in on this. (He wishes it was ten years ago, when they all thought they could keep the war Out There instead of bringing it home.) He wishes he could send someone he trusts after "Scott" and whoever else is involved.

Sure. World peace and a pony would be great too.

#  

When the call comes at oh-dark-thirty, nobody's asleep. Dani's on encrypted uplink to the Mountain - - Vala, he's pretty sure -- trying to find out how Scott got here, since he sure as hell didn't come through the Gate. He and Carter are burning the midnight oil to find their leak, no luck so far.

"I just got word," Barrett says when he answers. "Your guys -- Croft and Mundy -- they're dead."

"Where?" Because they should still be sitting in lockup, unless Gibbs has suddenly decided to become a trusting soul.

"In security holding," Barrett says. "The medical examiner's been called."

"Thanks," he says, because it's what you say, even if somebody's just ruined your night.

"Don't even think about lying," Dani says without looking up from her screen. "What?" she says a moment later, as the screen goes to sine-wave jammer.

"That was Barrett," he says. "Looks like Scott's still in the area."

"I'm going," she says, when he tells her the rest. All her reasons are good ones: Gibbs knows her so he won't shoot her on sight; the NCIS ME won't know what to look for; they need information and this is the best way to get it.

He doesn't like it.

They have no choice.

#  

Gibbs has always hated the nights when he can't sleep because of a nagging goddamn feeling there's something he's forgotten, some vital piece of information not gathered in or passed on up the line. He knows it's one of those fantasies -- like dreaming you can fly -- that'll get you killed if you take it too seriously. But at least it means he's awake in the wolf hour when the call comes.

The two Marines they have in custody have just committed suicide. (The hell they have.)
Less than twenty-four hours ago, their dead jarheads had looked awfully goddamn relieved when Dr. Jackson told them to sit tight and she'd get their asses out of this mess (whatever the hell this mess even is, other than an impending goatfuck, Jack O'Neill style). It was a fucking order even if she didn't give it out loud, even if dear little civilian Dr. Jackson shouldn't be giving Marines orders. (But of course Gibbs is the only one who knows orders were given and he can't tell anyone else because it's not his fucking secret to tell -- it isn't even O'Neill's. It's Hetty Lange's and Russia's and a lot of places where the dead past should stay buried.)

So he shaves and dresses and wakes up McGee and calls Ducky (who will call Palmer) and they're off to the races.

Fucking sucks to be driving anywhere at 3 AM, but at least there's not much traffic at this hour; nothing like starting the workday early. And maybe it's just the lack of coffee (probably not; McDonald's coffee sucks but at least they have all night drive-throughs) or maybe he's just dazed by the lights reflecting off the rain slick pavement at oh fuck o'clock in the morning (never happened before), or maybe he's had an actual revelation (they happen), but suddenly he sees a pattern and he doesn't like it. This makes three out of three times Jack O'Neill and Trent Kort have been on his radar simultaneously during a case, and three out of three times someone has ended up really fucking dead under mysterious circumstances.

(A witness in the McAvoy case. Jenny. Now these clowns. Just because the evidence is circumstantial, Mike Franks once pointed out, doesn't mean it lies.)

By the time he gets there, Ducky and Palmer are already at the scene, busily determining the time (recent) and the circumstances (confusing) of death. (Palmer, naturally, is annoyingly chipper and full of enthusiasm at this wretched hour of the morning. Palmer is always full of enthusiasm.) McGee and his camera show up just behind Gibbs. (McGee's out of breath and looks like he's decided to envy Ziva and DiNozzo their little trip to Kansas.) So far as Gibbs knows, no one's bothered to call Dr. Jackson (certainly no one should think they're supposed to call Dr. Jackson), but somehow Gibbs is completely unsurprised when she turns up maybe a minute behind McGee.

Little Dr. Jackson looks like she hasn't slept since the last time Gibbs saw her. No, scratch that; she looks like she hasn't slept since NCIS picked up her people. Rumpled khakis and a sweatshirt this time. Same overstuffed brief bag, but without the armloads of files (the files were a cover; he's seen the gun calluses on her hands now). She digs out her ID badge (NID) and clips it into place as she moves past the Marines securing the scene (military detention, military security, and Marines don't take a doughnut break when they get bored so what the hell happened here?)

Whatever the hell she heard that brought her here, it's clear she wasn't expecting to see this.

Dr. Jackson's pulled a set of gloves out of her brief bag and she's pulling them on as she walks to the bodies. "Who's touched the bodies?" she demands (and I want to know right the fuck now; her voice has the snap of drill sergeants past).

Ducky blinks at her (mild and vague and harmless. It's a lie of course; Ducky can read both the living and the dead like a page of print, but Dr. Jackson doesn't know that yet).

"You must be Dr. Jackson," Ducky says, offering his hand. He's still crouched by the bodies. "I'm Dr. Mallard. My friends call me "Ducky," of course. It was inevitable, I suppose, and one must always accede to the inevitable with grace. This is my assistant, Mister Palmer."

"Turn them over," Dr. Jackson says tightly. She doesn't take the offered hand.

Ducky looks at Gibbs. Gibbs nods fractionally.
Dr. Jackson kneels beside the first body: Sgt. Croft. She runs her fingers over the back of his neck, ruffles his hairline, then pulls out a penlight and opens Sgt. Croft's mouth. Ducky's babbling (his babbling brooks have always been deep enough to drown in) about how they can't rule out poison until the autopsy, and about the fascinating case he once assisted on in which the deceased managed to poison himself with plain ordinary tapwater. Dr. Jackson ignores him and moves on to Door Number Two (Sgt. Mundy). Whatever she's looking for, she doesn't find it (thank fuck, considering the quality of her recent revelations), and gets to her feet. They've now reached the point in Ducky's monologue where he asks Dr. Jackson what her specialty is.

"Archaeology, actually," she says, her tone absent

"Then these fellows would be rather recent for you," Ducky says cheerfully. "Well, Mr. Palmer, I don't believe there's anything else to find here. Let us return to the lab with our new friends and enquire further."

"I am so sorry, Doctor-- Ducky. My manners are terrible," Dr. Jackson says. "This was such a shock."

"Death is always unexpected, Dr. Jackson," Ducky says gently.

"Dani. Please. I just … I'm very sorry." Whatever the hell brought her here, what she found is enough of a shock she's having trouble holding on to the cover identity she paraded yesterday.

"It's quite all right, my dear. If I may be so bold, what is it you were hoping to find?" Ducky asks. Behind Gibbs, McGee is still snapping pictures; he finishes up and nods, and Palmer starts zipping the bodies into a couple of big black bags.

"Hoping not to find," Dr. Jackson says. "There's a typical abrasion pattern in the soft palate and throat, but I didn't see it." (Typical of what? Ducky knows there's a time and place for everything; he doesn't ask.) Dr. Jackson turns to Gibbs, and he can see her eyes are blank, empty. "I need MRIs on brain and upper spine before these bodies are opened."

Ducky looks at Gibbs; Gibbs finds himself shrugging helplessly. "What the hell, it's only money," he says wearily.

"Would you care to attend the autopsy?" Ducky asks Dr. Jackson. (Some guys take girls to baseball games.) "We could discuss your case further."

The look Ducky shoots Gibbs when Dr. Jackson turns away is penetrating and speculative. (Great. Someone else with questions about the mysterious Dr. Jackson and this fucking case. Just what he needs.)

"No," Dr. Jackson says. "Thank you. I-- I-- I think I'm double parked."

Gibbs walks her back to her car. (It really is double-parked; speaks of the hurry she must've been in to get here, though from the look of her she probably wasn't sleeping when the phone rang.) Gibbs can't help but wonder who the fuck tipped her off. Sure as hell wasn't one of his people; two of them are in Kansas and none of them trust her. (God knows why he does.) He doubts she'd tell him even if he asked. Dr. Jackson, like Hetty before her (grandmother in spirit even if not in name) strikes him as the sort of woman who'd die to keep her secrets.

Dr. Jackson chirps the little car unlocked (again from a distance; after yesterday -- was it only yesterday? Jesus fuck -- he really can't fault her paranoia), and then she looks at him like she's seeing him for the first time. She looks haggard under the bright white security lights.

"I, I, you know, I, we, we didn't get along at first; we were too different and I thought, I hoped, there
could be a peaceful solution and they, you know, Marines, "Semper Fi", it's Latin, you know, "Semper Fidelis" -- "Always Faithful" -- and we were, we promised, I promised, I told them they'd be safe and I said I was going to get them out and now they're dead because they trusted me."

The Corps is (still) mother and father and the closest thing (now) to a religion he has. No one who isn't a Marine gets it (O'Neill never really did), especially civilians, but somehow (impossibly) little Dr. Jackson comes close, because "Semper Fi" isn't just what they promise to the nation, it's what they promise to each other. Whatever command Dr. Jackson served in (whatever she did there), those Marines were her people. She's lost them and she feels responsible and she's melting down like a butterbar who's just found out where babies come from.

"You have any idea why CIA might be sniffing around this case?" Yesterday morning, Dr. Jackson strolled into NCIS and generally proceeded to really fucking wreck what might've shaped up to be a decent week. If he were a better person he'd maybe spare her some sympathy right now, but he figures it's his turn to return the favor.

She looks startled. The genuine article (not there for long, but he's got the sense she's holding on to her composure with teeth and fingernails and losing the battle). More than that, she looks confused, and that's something he really doesn't fucking like. Whoever she expected to be poking around the edges of this sordid little clusterfuck, it sure as hell wasn't them.

"The CIA?" Dr. Jackson asks (unnecessarily). "No. Who?"

"Guy's name's Trent Kort," Gibbs tells her. "Real pain in the ass. Always seems to turn up somehow or other whenever you guys get involved in our business." He watches her face carefully, but all he sees there is exhaustion.

"What do you mean "us guys," Agent Gibbs?" She's watching him as closely as he's watching her. Well, fuck. Mutual alarm really isn't a companionable sensation.

"O'Neill," he says. "O'Neill's people. You. Counting this one, we've worked three cases in the last few years O'Neill's had some kind of interest in. Trent Kort's turned up every single time." (And he's not going to fucking think of the case last summer; the goddamn clusterfuck that ended with Jenny's death. He's spent an entire year looking for someone to blame for that.)

"Trent Kort is with the CIA," Dr. Jackson says. Flat-voiced and stating the obvious; she's playing for time and they both know it. She shakes her head, stares off at nothing at all. "They trusted me," Dr. Jackson repeats, and she takes a deep breath and looks up at him. (Hetty had that same goddamn look after Sofia got shot; it's one of Life's fucking little ironies that if Dr. Jackson ends up pointed at Kort, Gibbs is going to have to try and stop her.) "I don't know him. We've worked with the CIA. They did a full round of security checks three years ago, after Moscow. Cleared the NID. Cleared us. We never had a problem with them."

(He's pretty sure that's true, as far as it goes, even if "us" doesn't have a name yet and dropping Moscow into the conversation is always good for a laugh.)

"I can check a few things," Dr. Jackson says vaguely, "but first I'm going to go ask Jack who Trent Kort is, Agent Gibbs. I haven't been in Washington that long. I don't know everybody yet." There's a vague social smile on her face. There's an entire fucking graveyard in her voice. He doesn't get the sense Dr. Jackson's the forgiving sort.

"Look--" he says. He's not quite sure where he's going with this. *Don't shoot O'Neill until I can watch? Assassinating CIA case officers can't possibly be any good for your health?*
"I'll see you later," Dr. Jackson says. She turns away, opens the car door, and stops. "Oh," she says, not turning back. "I should say. I've got the information you wanted to bring Leon to get this dropped. Turns out our guys weren't anywhere near Kansas at all."

"Dr. Jackson," he says. "Don't do something stupid."

"I'll bring coffee," she says.

By the time the scene's wrapped up it's four am and there's no point in going back to bed, so he drives home and changes and goes for a run and watches the sun come up. Then shower, another shave, and it's off to see how today is going to blow up in his face. DiNozzo and Ziva walk through the doors just before eight. Neither of them looks like they've had any more sleep than he has.

"Hey, Boss," DiNozzo says, and then pauses and studies Gibbs for a moment (too fucking bad DiNozzo didn't give sweet little Dr. Jackson such a close inspection). "Rough night?"

"Our two suspects died in lockup about five hours ago," Gibbs says. "What do you got?"

"Nothing," DiNozzo says bitterly.

"In fact, we have quite a lot," Ziva says reprovingly. "It simply makes no sense. The guard at the gate insists he saw General Bradford enter the base on the afternoon of the break-in. While this was clearly not the case, he could not be convinced to change his story. In fact, a number of people report seeing General Bradford. It is odd that the base commander had no notion any such person was in his facility." She looks even more unhappy about that than she looked when Gibbs sent her off to Kansas in the first place (if that's even fucking possible).

"He was really surprised when we showed him the video," DiNozzo adds helpfully. "It was time-stamped and everything."

"You got the footage?" DiNozzo nods. "Put it up on the screen."

The footage from the security camera is grainy. Angle on the guardhouse, generic black sedan pulled up to the barrier. Gibbs is pretty sure he knows what he's going to see. (He wishes he wasn't, but nothing this week has gone the way he wants it to.) He can't make out much of the two guys in the back seat, but leaning out of the window to talk to the guard, sure enough there's Dead Guy. (What a surprise.) The guard's frowning and shaking his head right up until Dead Guy hands over his (fake) ID and casually brushes the guard's arm in the process (whoops, sorry dude). Suddenly the guard's saluting, all sir-yes-sir-general-sir, and then the barrier goes up and Mr. Dead Guy drives straight into McConnell, no questions asked.

Neat trick, except how it's not.

Ziva shakes her head, confused and not liking it (join the fucking club, Agent David, there's plenty of room). "I do not know how he accomplished this, Gibbs," she says slowly. "I know many ways in which to gain entrance to a place without prior authorization—" (It isn't true that Ziva can't be tactful; she just chooses her moments.) "But this is not a method I have seen before." (She'd like some answers and suspects he has them. And it's only Tuesday: further proof the universe hates him.) Fortunately Gibbs is spared from having to come up with a load of on-the-spot bullshit by Dr. Jackson's second timely arrival of the day.

He thinks she might be moving in. He's pretty sure she can barely even see over the stack of objects in her arms: computer case, pastry box, cardboard container of coffees balanced on top of all that,
and a supersized Caf!Pow tucked into the mix. Her brief bag -- still full to bursting -- is slung over one shoulder.

"Good morning! I just couldn't stay away!" she sings out (bright and chirpy and Southern and the only two reasons Gibbs doesn't fucking shoot her is that she's got coffee, and he knows damn well she hasn't gotten any more sleep than the rest of them. She makes a beeline for DiNozzo's desk to spread out her wares. Doesn't bobble a single thing (apparently that part of the act is over). "I wasn't sure how everyone took their coffee," she says cheerfully, "so I just brought milk and sugar." A pint carton of milk materializes from her brief bag, along with a box of sugar. And spoons. And napkins.

"Are those … doughnuts?" DiNozzo asks, in the tones of a man lost in the desert who's just spied water.

"I just got an assortment. I hope that's okay." She stops, looks at DiNozzo for a moment. "Wow, Tony, you look bushed."

"Perhaps you will tell us how your colleague convinced the guard at McConnell that he was General Bradford, Dr. Jackson," Ziva says, before DiNozzo and Dr. Jackson have a chance to start up round two of Love's Young Dream.

There's a long beat of silence while Ziva stares at Dr. Jackson and Dr. Jackson stares back at Ziva and DiNozzo looks like he'd throw himself on the fucking grenade if he could just figure out where the hell it was. "How come we never get doughnuts like this, Boss?" DiNozzo asks (having decided where the grenade is; smart boy).

"You're too cheap to buy them," Gibbs tells him. He wishes there'd been some way to keep Dr. Jackson and Ziva apart, but he's not going into this outgunned.

"He's not my colleague," Dr. Jackson finally says. "He's the guy who killed my colleagues. But sure," she says (all sunshine and kittens again), "I can tell you that." Her eyes flick to Gibbs. We need to talk, her hands say. "I brought something for Abby too," she says. "And I'd like to give it to her before it melts. Or eats through the cup." (Smile pretty for the cameras, Gunny.)

Gibbs knows Ziva reads Dr. Jackson's comment about the Caf!Pow in the same spirit Dr. Jackson made it: as an attempt to make a strategic retreat from this whole damn conversation. Ziva shoots him one of those looks (it promises another whispered conversation by the stairwell, pretty fucking soon, oh joy) and mutters something dark in Hebrew. Gibbs doesn't understand a word of it. (It's better that way; otherwise, they might need to have a Little Chat about respect for authority, and that's one conversation he's never wanted to even think about having with Ziva.) Dr. Jackson, on the other hand, clearly has no trouble whatsoever understanding whatever the hell Ziva just said. She sets the Caf!Pow cup back down on DiNozzo's desk and turns around. Moonlight and magnolia has left the building; her expression has DiNozzo beating a hasty retreat behind his desk and out of the line of fire.

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He's spent enough time around Ziva to pick up a few scraps of Hebrew. Nothing much, but enough to catch that whatever Dr. Jackson says to Ziva (in the same ball-shrivelingly even voice she'd used at the crime scene) includes the words "comrade" and "avenge." And suddenly the look in Ziva's eyes is suddenly a hell of a lot less hostile, and the set of her mouth is almost respectful. Gibbs can't decide if that's a relief, or a really goddamn disturbing development. (What the hell did she say to make Ziva believe her?) She asks Dr. Jackson a question, and her gesture indicates Gibbs and DiNozzo and McGee.
Dr. Jackson sighs, and looks faintly apologetic (and under that is the simmering determination that's really starting to worry him, because people that determined are the kind who strap bombs to themselves). He can't follow what she says, but whatever it is, Ziva nods sharply, and the hostility is gone, replaced by something that feels uncomfortably to Gibbs like understanding. (Gibbs knows all about the kinds of things Ziva David understands.) Her smile is grim; Ziva says something else, and this time Gibbs knows what it is: a proverb she once translated for him. ("When you have no choice, mobilize the spirit of courage.")

Dr. Jackson's reply is in some language that sure as hell isn't Hebrew (anything you'd like to share with the rest of the fucking class, Doctor?) DiNozzo (eternally helpful, and with his mouth half-full of doughnut) says, "Wow. And no one even bought me dinner first."

Dr. Jackson says something else to Ziva (back in Hebrew, and it's probably not complimentary of DiNozzo, because Ziva actually laughs, short and sharp like the bark of a wolf. This may be a sign of the Apocalypse.)

"Is that the footage from Kansas?" Dr. Jackson asks, glancing at the frozen image of the guard post up on the screen. And just like that they're back to business as usual.

"Yeah," DiNozzo says. "We couldn't shake the guard's story. He insisted it was General Bradford he let into the armory..." He's cranky; Gibbs doesn't blame him. DiNozzo's clearly sure the guard was lying, and Ziva believes the kid's story. (DiNozzo's giving Ziva a puzzled look. They're usually on the same page by now.)

"Looks like they've been shopping in our secret labs," Dr. Jackson says lightly (Gibbs is beginning to realize that when you hear that tone from Dr. Jackson, it's time to drop whatever the hell you're doing and start really worrying). "I'm pretty sure they're using a targeted hypnotic that came out of one of our programs."

"We've got some interior footage," DiNozzo the eternally helpful tells her. "They put cameras inside the armory because people were smoking in there." (There's a pause for everyone to contemplate the idiocy of smoking in an armory.) "I'll just get our very own Special Agent Timothy McGee to enhance that for us, and it'll be ready for your viewing pleasure." (Gibbs's palm itches even more than usual but DiNozzo's well out of range at the moment.)

McGee gives DiNozzo a dark look. "I'm not sure how sharp I can get the images. The source was pretty degraded."

"Anything will be a great help, Agent McGee," Dr. Jackson says. "Meanwhile, that'll give me enough time to drop this off with Abby and check in with Dr. Mallard, right?"

McGee (already staring into his computer) nods distractedly. DiNozzo, eager to play tour guide, starts to get to his feet.

"Report," Gibbs says, pointing. DiNozzo subsides, disappointed. (Still not as satisfying as a good headslap, but it's going to have to do.)

#

Walking into Abby's lab is always an adventure: you never quite know what you're going to get. Today Abby's got a generic little spray bottle in her hand, and looks entirely too pleased with herself. She bounds to her feet the second the door opens and spritzes him and Dr. Jackson with god-only-knows-what before they're three steps into her lab. (Whatever the hell it is doesn't smell like much, but Gibbs waves at the air in front of his face anyway.)
"I copied it!" Abby crows in delight. "It was totally easy, and then all I had to do was build an atomizer that doesn't let them mix until they reach the air because this stuff degrades really fast you know, and now I know you're both you, here!"

She hands Dr. Jackson the atomizer. Dr. Jackson hands her the Caf!Pow. Call it an exchange of hostages.

"Can you build another one of these?" Dr. Jackson asks eagerly, inspecting the bottle. "I don't think we've ever thought about small-scale delivery systems." "We," Gibbs notices, still doesn't have a name. (Well, other than "O'Neill," and right about now Gibbs would give several vital organs to know what the fuck Hetty's little Jacky-boy has brought to NCIS's doorstep this time.)

"Easy-peasy!" Abby says cheerfully. "I could even do it while you're here."

"That would be great." Dr. Jackson is opening her laptop and deploying the heavy artillery (nice to think she still thinks Abby's lab is bugged). Anyone who doesn't think this woman is damn scary is either an eternal optimist like Abby or a total fucking idiot. Gibbs is neither. (Okay, except that he trusts her, but let that pass.)

Dr. Jackson turns to Gibbs. "So, we've been thinking about what Scott stole--" and then she breaks off mid-thought, apparently having just now remembered something more important. "Oh, Abby, I brought you something."

"Yeah," Abby points out reasonably. "You brought me a Caf!Pow."

"Something else," Dr. Jackson says, digging through her brief bag, and then they're apparently back to the original conversation. "And with Scott having -- overseas -- connections -- the source -- we'd wondered why they'd bother, since they had to surface to do it. But we think they mean to set up to produce them locally. We've done significant back-engineering to adapt them, which is probably the point." (Without all the details -- which so far he hasn't fucking gotten -- this is all just white noise to Gibbs. He supposes he'll be read in on whatever it is eventually.)

Dr. Jackson stops digging, grins, and produces a small white box and a large brown envelope. She hands both to Abby without a break in her monologue. "And then of course there's the opportunity to discredit the Program by leaking this stuff. Assuming there's anyone alive on Earth once they have." (Charming. Gibbs wonders if "The Program" has a first name, or if it's something like Cher or Madonna.)

"It's a shrunken head!" Abby crows in delight, at the same instant Gibbs says, "What?"

Dr. Jackson smiles at Abby, and it's not a purple-flowers kind of smile; there's real warmth behind it. (This one's a girl after Hetty's own heart, and Gibbs would hate her for dredging up his tyotia from the graveyard of memory, except for the fact the similarities he sees are valuable intel.) "I brought you the paperwork too, so you own it legally," she tells Abby.

Abby flings her arms around Dr. Jackson's neck. (Abby's random acts of affection are an unexpected -- though hardly unpleasant -- occupational hazard. Still, Gibbs suspects they might take some getting used to.) "Thank you, Dani. Thank you thank you thank you!" Abby is nearly vibrating.

Dr. Jackson merely looks bemused as she returns the hug (and for just an instant, gone so quick he almost thinks he didn't see it, happy). Gibbs still isn't sure whether this was a bribe (and if so, for what?) but he sets the question aside for later. It's more interesting to note Dr. Jackson could read Abby that clearly on such brief acquaintance. (And, of course, that she apparently keeps human heads in her desk drawer.)
Abby bounces off, calling over her shoulder, "And now me and Mr. Shrunken Head will make you up another spray bottle and some stuff to go in it! Don't go anywhere!"

When Abby and her new accessory disappear into the back of the lab Dr. Jackson's smile fades. "What did they steal, Dr. Jackson?" he demands. Sometimes (usually) knowing is better than not knowing. He's not sure if this is one of those times or not.

Dr. Jackson looks grim. "They've got samples and manufacturing specs for three of the things Jack was trying to take out of play: the Reole chemical, dargol, and naquaadriah."

"Give it to me in English," he grumbles. If she's going to invite herself to play on his team, she's sure as hell going to learn to play by his rules.

He can tell immediately which thing on that list is the least bad, because that's what she leads with. "The Reole chemical you've seen in action. That's what Scott's been using to impersonate people. Drug someone with it and they'll see whatever -- or whoever -- you want them to." She leans back against the lab bench. Over her shoulder, Gibbs can see Abby fussing with something in an Erlenmeyer flask. "Dargol." Dr. Jackson shrugs, gives him a look like she's got a feeling he's not going to believe her (and the goddamn thing is, he's already having trouble mustering up even a token amount of preemptive disbelief). "Have you ever heard of the Fountain of Youth, Agent Gibbs?"

"It's in Florida," he says (can't help himself). At least it gets him a smile.

"If you give someone dargol, they become young again. Early twenties, more or less. There's just one catch. Dargol gives you amnesia. Luckily, there's an antidote. But it only cures the amnesia. So administer both drugs and you have a "reset" button. It may cure disease, too. We don't know. Obviously we haven't done too much experimenting. But naquaadriah is the real problem." She stops.

"Pick it up," he snaps, because if those two aren't the real problem, what is will probably give him nightmares for the next month.

"I'm trying to figure out how to explain it so it makes sense to you," she says, equally crossly. "Think of it as, as uranium," she says. "That's close enough. Naquaadriah is an artificial element, made from enriching … something we don't have here. The enrichment process is so dangerous we only do it Overseas; naquaadriah is volatile, which means it explodes more or less randomly. But naquaadriah is also what runs our advanced ships. Our allies have the plans for the ships -- by treaty -- but we haven't given them the power source. If Scott leaks the manufacturing specs, someone will build a refinery. Here. And it will explode. And worse -- a naquaadriah grenade could take out a city. Do you think they won't make those too?"

"But Scott's people already have it -- you said," he says. (He doesn't want to go where his mind is trying to lead him, back to Hetty who would have been willing to -- almost did -- spend all of their lives to keep the missiles from flying.)

"I'm not sure who all is playing, Agent Gibbs," Dr. Jackson confesses. "I checked out your Trent Kort after I went home last night. I found out he was tangled up with Farrow-Marshall. Farrow-Marshall's a dead issue now, but they were retroengineering overseas tech for local use. Scott may be in charge of… whatever's going on… or he may be working for someone -- and Kort may be involved, too -- but whoever's behind this seems to be trying to take up where Farrow-Marshall left off. It's either foreign, domestic, or overseas, or a combination, and we won't know, until … I don't know," she finishes helplessly.
"Until we catch them," he says. "And either way, you've got a leak."

If Kort's involved, that "clearing" the CIA did (whatever the hell that was about; his relationship with Dr. Jackson is still a "real names omitted" sort of thing) probably wasn't worth shit. From Dr. Jackson's expression, she knows it too. She just sighs and rubs her eyes.

"You said the CIA asked for the case?" she says.

"Director Vance brought it up. I said no," he says. He doesn't feel much need to mention Kort's friendly little phone call. Not yet, anyway. Not like Dr. Jackson's giving up all her secrets.

"Because NCIS involvement made our operation visible," Dr. Jackson says, half to herself. "So nobody has to explain how they know about it. They can just point to you. I retired, you know," she adds with faint bitterness.

He brushes that aside (heard O'Neill swear twice a week he was going to retire, even back then). "We catch them, and the problem goes away. We know they're still watching us. What kind of bait will bring your bad guys out into the open?" Because everything else can wait until they've caught Dead Guy and friends and have a trail to track back. And if it leads back to Kort, that's just the icing on the cake.

Dr. Jackson looks unhappy (more unhappy; she's looked pretty damn displeased since she dropped the chirpy, bubbly mask she brought in with the doughnuts and coffee this morning). It's the look of someone who's going to have to choose between the shitty option and one that's even worse and do it quickly. He's seen it before. On Ziva's face. (And on Hetty's, after Leningrad, when Sofia died.)

"Setting a trap for Scott will put your team in danger," she says flatly. He can hear the words she isn't saying: this op got Croft and Mundy killed, and she doesn't want to add McGee and Ziva and DiNozzo (and maybe even him) to that tally. And he knows she's just stating facts, the same way Hetty did when she briefed them before Poland. (We Do Not Talk About Poland all right, but he can't seem to stop fucking thinking about it.)

"Yeah," he says. "But we'll hang a whole bunch of civilians out to dry if we don't."

Little Dr. Jackson gives him a measuring look, and something at the back of her eyes makes his skin crawl just a little. (He thinks he might have liked it better when she was stepping on his foot and spilling his goddamn coffee and flirting with DiNozzo.) Finally she says: "If they're still in the area, that might mean they haven't filled their shopping list yet. We can use that. There's something that's pretty much the Holy Grail of overseas tech as far as some people are concerned." (For values of "people," Gibbs suspects, that includes "brain-sucking body-snatching alien parasites.") "We have one. Sort of. It doesn't actually work, but we can, ah, fix things so it looks like it does. For that I'll need Abby's help and McGee's. I understand they're good with computers."

He doesn't think this is a spur-of-the moment idea on her part, but then, he's known all along there was something more to today's visit than clearing Croft and Mundy. If that'd been all, she could have messengered over the documents.

"Computers?" Abby calls from the back of the lab. "McGee and I pretty much kick ass at computers!" (Really, it was too goddamned much to hope Abby was too busy playing with her chemistry set to have eavesdropped on their entire fucking conversation, because Abby has an advanced degree in multitasking and thinks five times as fast as any normal person.) There's a beat of silence that means Abby's thinking hard about something (he doesn't like it, because he's got a pretty good idea of what it is), and she adds, "Dani -- can I ask you a question?"
"Sure," Dr. Jackson says (completely unsuspecting; Gibbs'd be amused if anything about this whole fucking case was funny). "Shoot." She smiles vaguely in Abby's direction.

"Okay," Abby says. "So, when you said "domestic and foreign and overseas" before, foreign and overseas are usually the same thing, but you didn't really mean "overseas" overseas, did you?" The look she's giving Dr. Jackson (Dani) hints at the penetrating mind Abby likes to hide in plain sight under the skulls and bows and sparkly purple nail polish. "And your advanced ships. They're not the kind that float in the ocean, like, on water -- are they?"

Gibbs counts maybe three heartbeats as Dr. Jackson rearranges her entire worldview and decides which side of the fence to jump down on.

"For the last ten years," she finally says, "a top secret government military program has been using an ancient artifact of extraterrestrial origin -- the Stargate -- that generates a stable wormhole vortex to travel to other worlds which hold similar devices. We've brought back a great deal of advanced technology from those places -- which is the current problem -- and used it to build a number of advanced ships. Starships. Right now only the US Air Force has them. Next year, the Stargate Program goes public, and the thirteen member nations who already know about the Program start fighting over the stuff we've brought back."

"So "overseas" is outer space, and "ships" are spaceships," Abby says (nodding as if all of this makes perfect sense), "but what about the aliens?"

Aliens have entered the conversation because it's obvious to Abby you can't have spaceships without aliens. (And, Gibbs has to admit -- however grudgingly -- someone had to build all that problem-child technology O'Neill and friends apparently brought back to haunt them.)

"The evil parasitical body-stealing alien snakes that we're going to totally deny the existence of, or the benevolent incredibly advanced aliens who mostly won't talk to us?" Dr. Jackson asks (and if he'd known Abby was the key to opening the Well of Secrets, he could have brought Dr. Jackson down here a day and a half ago and saved himself one fuck of a lot of grief). "We've mostly taken out the Goa'uld. That's the body-snatchers. The Asgard -- the benevolent incredibly advanced guys - -don't keep in touch these days. And before you ask, that isn't what they really call themselves. For some reason, most of the alien races in the universe like to come to Earth and impersonate gods. Just … don't ask. I don't know."

"Wow. That is like … wow. You must have the coolest job in the entire world!" Abby says delightedly. "Have you been to other planets? Have you talked to aliens? What's--" (She's thinking too fast to keep up with herself now.) "Oh, wait until I tell McGee! I can tell McGee, right? Because it would really suck not to be able to tell anybody!"

"Tell me about it," Dr. Jackson mutters. "Well, he's going to have to know something. Because he's going to have to help us hack into Area 51. And Stargate Command."

"We're hacking into Area 51?" Abby's face breaks into an ecstatic grin. "For real? Wow! This is amazing. It's totally like being in a spy movie! An alien spy movie!"

Dr. Jackson smiles just a little. She looks half amused, half sorry, and for just a second, Gibbs wonders if Abby reminds Dr. Jackson of her former self -- the one on the other side (the good side) of the divide between before O'Neill and after. (It's a big fucking divide, and Gibbs knows more than he wants to about what crossing it is like.)

"We'll have inside help to plant the technical specifications; I just need you and Agent McGee to get us into and out of the system. S-- my friend can't do it because she can't get through the firewalls
from where she is. So she says. Don't ask me," Dr. Jackson says. "But it won't be as hard as it could be. She's left us a backdoor into the system."

"McGee and I can totally do that," Abby says with absolute confidence. (In anyone else, it would be arrogance, but he's seen Abby at work, and the result speaks for itself.) And then she's babbling about network enumerating and SQL injections and port scanners and opening about three dozen windows on her computer that are supposed to indicate something or other. Dr. Jackson looks at Gibbs helplessly, shrugs, and mouths "archaeologist." He can't help the short bark of laughter.

McGee sounds distracted when Gibbs calls upstairs. (McGee usually sounds distracted, but this is the thinking, working kind of distracted.) He says he's almost done cleaning up the security footage, and would Gibbs mind giving him ten more minutes and then he'll bring himself and the footage down to Abby's lab.

"Ten minutes, McGee," Gibbs says. It comes out sharper than he means it: yesterday morning this case was just a pain in his ass -- today it's heading toward something between "goatfuck" and "DEFCON 1", and apparently he's the only one (other than Dr. Jackson and oh let's not forget O'Neill) who gets to know. But at least the delay will give them a chance to visit Ducky's lair and find out what he knows about their dead Marines. (And maybe give Ducky a chance to form an, oh, let's call it an informed opinion about the good Dr. Jackson). "We're on the clock on this one."

"Yeah, Boss," McGee says, and hangs up the phone.

When they walk through the doors into Autopsy, Ducky's at the deep double-basin sink, washing his hands with a surgeon's precision. He glances their way and smiles warmly. "Ah, Jethro -- and Dr. Jackson -- Dani. I was just about to call you. Mr. Palmer and I have finished our examination of these poor fellows, and it's just as I thought -- while it was made to appear they'd hanged themselves, what actually caused their unfortunate late-night demise is something far more curious."

Dr. Jackson looks wary, her eyes flicking to where Croft and Mundy lie side-by-side on their stainless-steel tables, Y-shaped incisions already neatly sewn back up with black thread. Both guys have meat tags tattooed along their ribs. (More proof they'd been in some Hot Zone somewhere, not that he needs it by now.)

"Were they poisoned?" Dr. Jackson asks, walking over to the lightbox. There are MRI films clipped to it. (Ducky had been awfully damn curious about Dr. Jackson's insistence on MRIs for the two bodies. Said he recalled that the lovely Samantha Carter from Colorado had asked some rather curious questions about the possibility of brain growths in one of the victims from the McAvoy case, and isn't that interesting?)

"Not so far as I was able to determine." Ducky says, "though certainly their eating habits were most unhealthy. Antemortem bruising, petechiae, ligature marks all support death by hanging, but in fact they were each nearly dead when someone suspended them. If I can call your attention to this MRI--"

"The frontal lobe is dark," Dr. Jackson says. She looks puzzled.

"It has, in fact, been cooked," Ducky says, sounding pleased. (Ducky collects weirdness the way DiNozzo collects pin-ups.) "Microwaved, to be precise. Between the cerebral swelling, the hemorrhaging, and -- of course -- the loss of brain function, these poor fellows were not long for this world regardless." Ducky regards Dr. Jackson mildly, with an I don't suppose you could tell me where two Marines in lockup got their hands on a microwave oven at two in the morning sort of
"Microwaved is pretty much it," Dr. Jackson says unhappily. "One of our programs has a device that can do this. It's basically a… A "zap gun". It fires an Ultra Low Frequency beam. I'm not sure how it works."

"At an intensity low enough to leave the skull intact it would take nearly a minute to cause this amount of damage," Ducky says. His tone is gentle. Ducky's a gentleman of the old school. He won't call a lady a liar to her face.

"It hurts," she says. She sounds -- uncomfortably -- like she is speaking from personal experience. Add that to the eight million other things Gibbs really fucking hates about this case, and Dr. Jackson, and ever having been introduced to Jack O'Neill in the first place. She pushes her glasses up and rubs her eyes. "Maybe enough to paralyze them. I don't know. I wasn't there. They could've been stunned by something else. Or just restrained. I… There wasn't anything else, was there? Abrasion of the upper spine? Lesions in the cerebellum?"

"No," Ducky says, putting a hand on her arm reassuringly. "You may rest assured, my dear. I was most careful."

"Thank you," she says, and then looks back at the bodies. Maybe angry, maybe sad, maybe both. Gibbs still can't quite read her; another thing he doesn't like. "They were murdered," she says. (Stating the obvious. Gibbs is starting to get the sense that's just her style. Saying the words puts the idea into play.)

"By someone who wished to delay our discovery of that fact, but who meant for us to discover it eventually," Ducky agrees. "If our perpetrator had, as you suggest, a method to stun his victims, and possibly even assistance committing his crimes, why not simply hang these poor gentlemen? I assure you, I would have reached a finding of murder regardless."

"He was signing his work," Dr. Jackson says. Her voice is dead even. "He was sending us a message. And signing it."

Ducky shares a look with Gibbs over the top of Dr. Jackson's head, and it takes Gibbs straight back to the bad old days, East Berlin and Leningrad and Minsk ("And I don't care what you do with the crazy British doctor," Hetty told Gibbs. "Just don't lose him. He belongs to a friend of mine.") Gibbs and Ducky both know about the sort of message (threat) Croft and Mundy carried with them to the morgue. And the kind of people who send messages like that.

"He knows we're onto him," Gibbs says. He knows it doesn't mean they've folded their tents and gone to ground, and so does she. The bad guys don't start sending postcards (bodies) until they're really fucking desperate, and desperation makes people dangerous and unpredictable. They still want something, and they're going to be in a hurry to get it.

Both Ducky and little Dr. Jackson have been around the block (and around the block and around the block) enough times that he doesn't need to say time is running out. Dr. Jackson (naturally) says it anyway, and she sounds pissed about it too (ten years at the war is a long time). "This means the timetable's moved up."

Ducky looks sharply at him. (Ducky can hear the words Dr. Jackson isn't saying.) Gibbs shakes his head. Those particular riptides worry the hell out of Gibbs too, but there's no fucking time. (But Hetty once told them a battered sword's better than no sword at all when the enemy's standing outside your gate.)
"Yeah," Gibbs says.

Dr. Jackson says: "Thank you, Ducky." (She sounds almost normal.)

As promised, McGee's waiting in Abby's lab with the footage from McConnell when they come back from Autopsy. The footage is clearer, but not by much (McGee bitches about having to make do with McConnell's substandard technology). They get the arrival at the guardhouse (and the exit too) and then the image jumps from the guard post to the inside of the armory: fuzzy bird's eye view of a shitload of crates and racks. Dead Guy saunters in (his face is blurry, but Gibbs recognizes the build and buzzcut), followed by two other guys. All of them wearing civvies.

"I wish I could see them naked," Dr. Jackson says absently. Gibbs thinks she's mostly talking to herself, and spares a moment to give thanks for DiNozzo's absence from this little conversation. McGee glances at her, startled. Not sure if he should be horrified or not. (Gibbs wonders what little Dr. Jackson thinks she'd see. He wonders if he even wants to know.)

Dead Guy and Friends move busily around the warehouse, touching things, moving boxes, all the time in full view of the camera. Whatever the fuck they're doing, it's mostly obscured by the angle, the distance, and the fact this is one really shitty security camera. (Gibbs's seen better at the local Stop 'n Rob.) Ten minutes later (almost to the second; the camera may be a piece of shit but the image is time-stamped), they walk back out.

"I ran the whole tape, Boss," McGee said. He's frowning at the screen like the footage is a personal enemy. "This is the only time our guys are on it."

"New triumphs of miniaturization," Dr. Jackson says dryly, and that's when the penny drops.

Dead Guy and his two hench-guys went to a fuckton of trouble to break into McConnell. Dead Guy and his two hench-guys were sure as hell ready for their security camera close-ups, Mr. DeMille. Once they'd been caught on camera for a suitable length of time, Dead Guy and his two hench-guys walked right back out of there. Empty handed.

"So why is McConnell saying they had a theft when nothing's missing?" Gibbs means it as a rhetorical question (mostly), but McGee looks like he's worrying he might have to come up with a good answer.

"Scott probably told them they did, somehow. He needed to set up a plausible crime to get someone else to pick up Ike and Jorge. They would have recognized him," Dr. Jackson says, and it sounds tangential but Gibbs has a hunch it's not. (He's starting to realize she comes at the facts from some pretty goddamn strange angles, sometimes.) "So even after they'd left Area 51 with the material he couldn't approach them directly. And he probably couldn't send his underlings. Jaffa aren't -- usually -- that big on initiative, and if they weren't Jaffa, Ike and Jorge could've taken them out and run for cover. Scott faked up the break-in at McConnell to get you to bring them in. It didn't have to stick any longer than it took for him to come and grab what they'd been carrying."

Nice of her to put it together so neatly. (Go to the head of the class, Dr. Jackson.) "Sloppy work," Gibbs says finally.

Dr. Jackson shakes her head slightly. "They usually aren't even this detail-oriented," she says absently. "That makes me think we haven't met all the players yet."

"They" presumably refers to these "Jaffa" bastards. Or possibly to the brain-sucking alien parasites.
Abby compounds the sensation when she says (entirely too cheerfully), "And now we get to hack into Area 51!"

"Boss?" McGee asks, eyebrows hovering somewhere around his hairline.

"Dr. Jackson?" Gibbs says. She's the one who knows what the fuck is going on. Gibbs is (apparently) just along for the whole ride through the not-so-fun-house. He sure as hell liked the whole situation better when he thought Croft and Mundy were bad guys and she was just some egghead ditz.

"Agent Gibbs, Agent McGee, Abby," Dr. Jackson says. Her tone is distant. Professional. Gibbs thinks this is what she must sound like when she's briefing her bosses. (Whoever the hell they are other than Jack O'Neill.) "To catch Scott and his associates, we need them to come to us. They know we know about their operation, so we're going to need to offer them a payday so big it will make them lose their heads. We're going to make them believe there's an item we call a sarcophagus at Area 51, and that we intend to move it. Here."

McGee's got his I would really like to ask a whole shitload of questions face on. Gibbs waves his hand. Go ahead.

"Can't they just break in to Area 51 themselves, Dr. Jackson?" McGee asks.

"Our security's too good there," Dr. Jackson says. Her voice is flat. She's somewhere near the end of her rope. It seems to be a pretty goddamn long rope, Gibbs thinks, but everyone's ends somewhere, never mind the thing Hetty was always fucking quoting about tying a knot in it and hanging on. (It's a FDR quote. Gibbs has no fucking idea why he still remembers that.) "Scott and his friends are actually the guys our security is designed to keep out."

"The brain-eating aliens!" Abby says happily (kid at Christmas; this is all just a game to her, and Gibbs hopes to fucking God it will stay that way). McGee gives her a sidelong look.

Gibbs sighs. He can't help it. It's that or go beat his head against the goddamn wall. "And you don't think taking this "sarcophagus" out of a high-security location and shipping it off to D.C. will make them suspicious?" he asks. (Someone's got to.)

Dr. Jackson shrugs. "Once Abby and Agent McGee have laid the false trail in our system, I'll plant our cover story. They'll check it, and it will check out."

That isn't half a story, as Hetty would say (and goddamn it, Gibbs would really like to stop thinking about her every five minutes sometime this fucking century). He glares at Dr. Jackson sternly.

"We know they're watching us. We know our security's been breached, here and there. If we say we're moving it so someone in Washington can use it without having to leave the city, they'll know. It's something they'll believe," she amends. (Still missing huge chunks of vital information, but Gibbs has the distinct feeling this is as good as it's going to get.)

"Use it?" McGee says. "For what?" Gibbs has a feeling McGee is thinking sarcophagus as in "coffin", but Gibbs suspects "sarcophagus" is actually code for "Freaky Alien Shit You Don't Want To Know A Damn Thing About No Really."

(He's right.)

"A sarcophagus can raise the dead, Agent McGee," Dr. Jackson says in the same tone she'd
probably use to inform him water was wet, or the earth was round, or that gravity kept everyone
from just floating off into space. (Gibbs is really starting to fucking hate this case.)

McGee's got a half-smile on his face like he thinks they're playing a joke on him. (Gibbs wishes they
were, but no amount of wishing things are otherwise is going to change the fact he's pretty sure little
Dr. Jackson is about as serious as a heart attack.) McGee looks at Gibbs and the smile fades.

"Wow, you mean like zombies?" Abby says, eyes sparkling.

"No," Dr. Jackson says, but her tone is gentle. "It literally brings someone back from the dead. More
to the point, it heals injuries. No matter how extensive, no matter how old. It will make sense to
Scott's people we're using it."

"Uh," McGee says after a moment. "We don't have anything that can do that."

"I've been telling you!" Abby sounds impatient, but she's grinning. (Gibbs wishes he, too, could
think this case was the coolest thing ever.) "It came from outer space! There's this whole secret
government program, and top secret alien technology, and advanced alien races, and we have
spaceships!"

"Abby," McGee says in mild reproof (there are other people here!), but Dr. Jackson's shaking her
head. The look she directs at McGee is full of sympathy.

"No, Agent McGee," she says. "Abby's telling the truth. If time weren't so short, I'd be happy to
explain everything to you."

McGee gives Dr. Jackson a thoroughly startled look, and Abby gives McGee a smug little smile, and
Gibbs is forced to wonder why every other person in the entire fucking building is having better luck
than he did plumbing Dr. Jackson's little well of secrets.

"But right now, Agent McGee, what I really need is for you and Abby to help me do something sort
of illegal."

"Boss?" McGee's always worn his heart on his sleeve and his thoughts on his face (and Gibbs can
whistle for training him out of it too), and right now what he looks is really fucking worried.

"Wouldn't have called you down here if I didn't want you involved, McGee," Gibbs says, and he
almost manages not to growl. Whoever's fault this is (Gibbs is tempted to blame O'Neill, or maybe
Hetty Lange, the source of original sin), McGee didn't have a damn thing to do with it.

"Okay," says McGee (warily), and "Okay," says Dr. Jackson (her voice is resigned, and Gibbs
suddenly hopes there's someone somewhere worrying about little Dr. Jackson), and Abby says, "Oh
boy!" (A corner of Dr. Jackson's mouth twitches upward.)

"I've still got access to the files you're going to need to alter," Dr. Jackson says. "I'll show you what
to needs to be changed, and how, and then you two," she smiles encouragingly at Abby and McGee,
"can work your magic."

Gibbs can't help but wonder what it is little Dr. Jackson does these days when she's not out
unhappily playing spook and hunting body-snatching snakes, and just what it was she used to do
under a mountain with Jack O'Neill, a metric fuckton of Marines, and some kind of weird
interdimensional wormhole thingy.

"Once we're in," Dr. Jackson says to Abby and McGee, "Sam will be waiting on the other side to
plant the necessary technical specs. You two won't need to worry about that."
There are always little wheels turning in McGee's head. Just now, Gibbs realizes, all those little gears and cogs are turning back to the McAvoy case (where this whole shitstorm actually started), and a pretty blond scientist-slash-Air-Force-officer with a ray gun, because suddenly McGee blurts, "Sam Carter? We're going to be hacking into Area 51 with Sam Carter?"

"Um…yes..." Dr. Jackson says slowly. She sounds puzzled. Apparently no one's bothered to tell her Sam Carter has a fan at NCIS. "Uh, Sam's an old friend of mine." She frowns. Thinking. Puzzling something through. "You came to the Mountain -- four? -- years ago."

"Yeah," Gibbs says. "Four years ago, one of your boys came to DC to kill Trent Kort." (And there's Kort again, wandering through this set of cases, and if Gibbs were to guess, he'd say there was probably a fucking body-snatching snake at the bottom of that little goatfuck too.)

"Obviously he failed," Dr. Jackson says dryly. She turns back to Abby and McGee, all business now. "Okay, let's start with the Mountain. My account's still active, so I'll show you around the system -- I log in there a couple of times a week; it won't be suspicious -- and then you can come in through the back door. I'm assuming you won't leave any fingerprints?"

McGee opens his mouth. Dr. Jackson holds a hand up before so much as a syllable escapes.

"I am an archaeologist," she says. "I know nothing about computers. I know how to find stuff in the database. That's it." Her warning is plenty clear: In English, McGee. And then she sits down in front of Abby's computer (gets Abby's permission first; smart girl) and starts typing.

The first screen up announces they're all going to be shot immediately just for seeing it, and their only possible hope for survival is to back out right the fuck now. Dr. Jackson types in her name, a number, and a long fucking password. Suddenly they're looking at a rotating seal that says "SGC". The bottom of the screen says (entirely too cheerfully, to his way of thinking), "Good morning, Dr. Jackson."

"Oh, cool," McGee says, getting into the spirit of things.

Dr. Jackson spends the next half hour carefully walking Abby and McGee through the database. Apparently they're going to change an after-action report filed a couple of years ago, and create a preliminary evaluation basic enough that Dr. Jackson doesn't feel the need to call in Colonel Carter. (She mentions Carter's rank in passing; Major to full bird in four is damned fast.) Once they've done that, they'll break in to Area 51 (what the hell's the world coming to that he's using "Area 51" in a sentence with a straight face?), and arrange to ship the thing to DC. Apparently they have the shell of one of these "sarcophagus" things they're actually going to ship (Dr. Jackson says it's necessary since they don't know where their leak is, or what information is being passed).

(McGee is using sentences with words like "spoof" and "mirror" and "clone" and Abby is nodding along eagerly, and Dr. Jackson is wearing a "this is all white noise to me" expression. Gibbs is amused that McGee's conversation with Dr. Jackson mostly involves him rephrasing things until he reaches her level of understanding. Apparently she wasn't blowing smoke when she said she knew nothing about computers.)

It takes them forty minutes to crack the system and finish the paperwork, then Dr. Jackson logs in again (legally, officially) to check their work. This is every bit as tedious as a stakeout, and as finicky as planting someone's fingerprints somewhere they've never been. (It's possible to be keyed up and bored off your ass at the same time. Gibbs learned that in sniper school. He doesn't joggle anybody's elbow.)

Before they hack into the system at Area 51, Dr. Jackson sends an email from her own computer.
Hotmail address (GeekGirl; figures) to Hotmail address (BlackWidow). Then she watches her wristwatch for about a minute and a half before she lets Abby and McGee get back to whatever they were doing (welcome to the exciting, fast-paced world of cybercrime). Their little virtual visit to Area 51 ("Even higher treason," Dr. Jackson says offhandedly) takes them about an hour. Gibbs contributes their McGuffin's final destination. If his people are going to be taking down Dead Guy and Friends, he wants it to be on familiar turf. NCIS has a warehouse out at Bolling (not officially on the books as belonging to them, of course); that'll do nicely.

Finally Dr. Jackson sighs and sits back. "Okay," she says. "If we don't all get arrested in the next five minutes, we got away clean."

McGee gives her a superior look, and Abby says: "Of course we did! We do this all the time! By which I don't mean "hack into government databases" because of course it's illegal and that would be wrong and we'd never do that, but--"

"--but you mean "hack into government databases," and I've always heard it's not wrong if you don't get caught." Dr. Jackson finishes for her, and Abby beams.

"Package is going to be on the night flight out of Nellis," McGee announces. "Arriving around 11:30 PM."

"Oh good," Dr. Jackson says. "Plenty of time to have a screaming fight with my boyfriend."

He's not going to ask.

#

Back upstairs, Dr. Jackson's overstuffed brief bag disgorges copies of duty rosters and depositions sufficient to exonerate Sgts. Croft and Mundy from any shadow of wrongdoing. (Unlike the other morning, she has no trouble at all locating the relevant documents in her bag.) To a civilian, it'd seem like too little, too late, but in reality, it's the difference between "honorable" and "dishonorable" and death benefits and survivors' pensions and where exactly they plant you. Gibbs remembers his manners and thanks her.

The (bullshit) McConnell case is a murder now, and dead Marines are NCIS business, so he can't just drop the whole damn thing down the deep well Dr. Jackson asked them to, but at least they're not tying it up with a pretty satin ribbon and handing it to Trent Kort like Vance wanted. (The more Gibbs finds out about this case the more he wonders why Vance is so interested in involving CIA.) He actually gets to share the lead with AFOSI -- the Air Force Office of Special Investigations -- on the basis of the vics being stationed at Dreamland. Some Pentagon colonel named Davis (professional pourer of oil on troubled civilians; Gibbs knows his type), shows up to take charge of the bodies and the case files and it's "Paul" and "Dani," and while Gibbs doesn't see any kind of high sign pass between Davis and little Dr. Jackson, Davis keeps his head down and just does his fucking job.

Before she leaves, he gives Dr. Jackson a time and a place to meet him, promises -- quietly, quietly -- he'll brief his people as soon as he can. What he's going to tell them is another question.

#

When the smoke and mirrors road show (Jackson and Davis and don't forget fucking O'Neill) is gone, he looks up to see Vance gazing down from his rocky crag, which means it's time for him to
go get his liver torn out. Again. He hates coming up these stairs. Hated it even when it was Jenny's office, because even though it was always "Jen" and "Jethro" and she teased him and always drank the last of his coffee, this was where she shut the door behind her and explained (often in excruciating detail) just exactly how he'd fucked up this time, or how his people had fucked up, or how he was going to fuck up if he didn't listen carefully. Now he hates coming up here because it isn't her office anymore. (Sterile, soulless, feels wrong.) (Vance started moving Jenny's things out when she was barely in the ground.)

Vance is waiting for him at the top of the stairs, like he doesn't trust Gibbs to walk into his parlor of his own volition (he might be right; who the hell knows). There's annoyance creeping in around the corners of his usual carefully-neutral expression. "Agent Gibbs," Vance says, and gestures Gibbs to precede him. (Makes the skin between Gibbs's goddamn shoulder blades prickle to have the man behind him, but there's not a hell of a lot he can do about it at this bright particular moment.) The door clicks shut, and Gibbs finds himself wanting to catalog all the potential exits from the room (not many: door, window, and the window'd be one hell of a fall).

Vance sits down behind his desk and opens a couple of file folders. He looks like he's not paying attention, but Gibbs knows that's bullshit. Hetty taught her ducklings that trick too, and Jenny had been a hell of a lot better at it. (Gibbs really fucking hates all the old ghosts this goddamn case is stirring. Poland and all the other shit that's better off not talked about or thought about.)

Vance says, "I thought I was clear that those Marines and this case should be handed over to Langley, since this is obviously some kind of espionage."

Gibbs barely restrains a smirk (he's pretty goddamn proud of his self-control, actually). "Actually, Director," he says pleasantly, "it looks like a murder case now, and last time I checked, dead Marines were our jurisdiction." (If their mysterious microwave-wielding adversary wanted them off the case, he'd miscalculated by a mile; the overconfident often do.)

Vance tries to sell Gibbs on suicide (not buying), the case being taken over by the Air Force (nope, just being good do-bees and sharing information), and even the notion Dr. Jackson is being distracted from her important work at the Aristarchus Institute (whatever the hell that is, and he wonders what it has to do with the NID, and also why Vance doesn't know what credentials she waltzed in here waving on Monday). He promises Vance he'll pass his concerns on to Dr. Jackson (assuming Gibbs sees her again, he says). It's half an hour of bullshit and balloon juice, and they'd probably still be there if Vance didn't have some kind of lunch date. (Places to go, asses to kiss. Gibbs figures it's just as well.)

#

O'Neill glances at his watch. They've timed this carefully (Calloway's at lunch, less embarrassing for everyone) and they both know their lines. It's a shame they don't know if they have an audience, but you can't have everything.

This better work. Dani isn't a field agent (she's a lot of things, but not that) and his cloak and dagger are in mothballs. But having Scott-the-Snake show up again to execute Croft and Mundy means they have more problems than they did on Monday morning. Sticking around DC is stupid, even for a snake (Ba'al was smart and Ba'al was clever; he'll take them stupid if he can get them, thanks), and it could mean a dozen things -- they're errand-boys not bosses; their timetable's been screwed up; their higher-up missed a rendezvous; they need to hand off what they already have to someone local -- but the one thing it does mean is the Good Guys might be able to make the Bad Guys lose their heads and step out into the spotlight. With the right incentive.

Dargol can make you young and pretty (if there's someone around you can trust to give you the
antidote), but only a sarc can raise the dead. Rewrite history, make you better, faster, stronger (crazy, but that's not a bug, it's a feature). It's candy everybody wants. So does Earth, of course -- it's been on the SGC Shopping List since Day One -- but fortunately they've never gotten their hands on one (not to keep, anyway, small mercies). The snakes have them in spades (so does the Alliance by now), but with something like that, there's always room for one more. Show them a chance at one, and it might be enough to make them grab for it.

Here's hoping.

Right on schedule Dani comes barreling into Irene's office and buzzes him, demanding he let her in right now.

Showtime.

"I can't believe you'd do this," she says, low and furious, before she's halfway through the door. "Not you. Were you going to tell me? Or let me guess? Or did you just think I was too fucking stupid to notice?"

"And this would be--?" They're both playing for eyes as well as ears. You never know.

"Oh, don't play stupid with me, Jack! Do you think Sam and I don't talk? In case your reason involves encroaching senility, let me be clear: the sarc. The magic box. The golden coffin of immortality. You had it shipped here, and since I really don't believe you intend to hand it around to your little political cronies, you intend to use it. Yourself."

"You're jumping to conclusions."

"I'm jumping to facts. Why, Jack? Why would you do this to me?"

"This is nothing to do with you. Unless, of course, you want it to be." The man who's talking is the man he was a long time ago, the man he briefly resurrected (once in living memory) because the Asgard and the Tollan wanted the Tau'ri to clean house. He lied to her then. At least he isn't lying to her now.

But her eyes go just as wide and shocked as if she weren't in on the game. "You--" she says. "You promised! We both did! Even if-- Never! Never again!"

"Grow up," he snaps. (Anger is easy, remembering she's not the target is harder.) "Promises are one thing. But this is real life. I need it. I'm going to use it. Why not?"

"You son of a bitch."

"Granted. In spades. Now, if there isn't anything else, I've got a lunch date."

"I hope you choke." She turns for the door and yanks on the knob, dragging at it until he buzzes it open. When it swings free she staggers back a step. Tries to slam it on her way out, but it doesn't.

The outer door does, though. He can hear it from here.

#

The team picks up Dr. Jackson around 2300 on their way out to Bolling. Paperwork for the stakeout is on Vance's desk, but Vance won't see it until tomorrow morning (Ziva says they'll have stolen the horse by the time the Director gets to the office, and she's right). Dr. Jackson's into the van before it comes to a stop (nothing to see here, just a nice lady dressed in black carrying a big bag; move
along), and then they're rolling again. DiNozzo -- no surprises there -- seems pretty thoroughly puzzled by Dr. Jackson's new look, but he keeps his mouth shut.

Through the gate, ID and paperwork all signed off and squared away, and they settle right in to a nice inconspicuous parking space and fire up the hardware. Back of the van's red-lit to preserve everyone's night vision; Gibbs climbs back and sits down.

Dr. Jackson looks him over and mentions their ballistic vests are going to do them more harm than good if Scott and his buddies are carrying their usual weapons. She isn't wearing one, so Gibbs sighs (fucking figures) and starts pulling his off. McGee goes next. DiNozzo looks at them like they're both crazy (once a cop, always a cop), but when Ziva starts ripping the buckles open, he follows suit. (The briefing Gibbs gave them for tonight's party leaned heavily on words like "alleged": he still can't bring himself to come right out and say the US Air Force is playing cowboys and aliens.)

He throws the vests into the front seat. Dr. Jackson thanks them. She's wearing her Beretta in a shoulder holster tonight (looks more comfortable in black turtleneck and BDUs and jump boots than she did in high heels and lace). Gibbs digs around under the seats until he comes up with a jacket that says "NCIS" on the back in reflective letters. He'd hate for one of his people to shoot Dr. Jackson by mistake when all hell inevitably breaks loose. She frowns a little rebelliously, but she puts it on.

Ziva has a set of headphones on and is fiddling with their directional mike. McGee's doing god-knows-what with a computer (probably has something to do with the bugs Colonel Carter apparently put in the shipment; Dr. Jackson says that's SOP). The rest of them don't have a damn thing to do but sit on their asses. About twenty minutes later, their crate arrives in an inconspicuous truck with D.C. plates and gets locked up nice and tight in the warehouse they're watching. (Here's a dirty little secret: you can trace most black budget programs by the amount of overtime they carry on the books.)

And then they wait.

Once upon a time (a lot of things Gibbs doesn't fucking want to think about begin that way), he and O'Neill had made a lot of jokes about the Gospel of St. Hetty (back then, they were even funny). Gibbs'd been pretty sure there'd been an entire goddamn book (maybe two) of that particular gospel devoted to patience: *Patience is a virtue. Patience is the first skill an operative should learn. Patience is less likely than haste to get a body killed. If at first you don't succeed, have patience.* Watching his team in the crowded van, Gibbs is beginning to think maybe Hetty had a point (maybe). DiNozzo bitches about being hungry (wonders aloud why no one thought to bring more doughnuts; Dr. Jackson gives him a withering look; everyone's on edge tonight), and twits McGee about that World of Whatever game McGee apparently spends his weekends playing. McGee shoots back that at least he does something more socially interactive with his time than looking at porn on the internet. Ziva tells them both to shut up, and then says something in Hebrew that makes Dr. Jackson chuckle. (Gibbs can't guess at any of the words this time, but he's pretty sure he doesn't want specifics anyway.) The only one who seems to be any damn good at waiting is Dr. Jackson. She sits quietly at his side, watchful. Like she's done this a thousand times before. Maybe she has.

About two hours into the endless bitchfest, someone tosses a crumpled up candy wrapper and it bounces off the back of his head. Gibbs picks it up without a word and puts it in his pocket. At least the fact the children are busy having a collective *oh, shit* moment means it's quiet for a few seconds.

A little after 0300, another anonymous truck with DC plates pulls up to the loading dock, and someone all in black (naturally), gets out of the cab. One, two, three, and the parabolic mike picks up: "It's locked," and then there's a *sound* -- half ricochet, half dentist's drill -- and a flash like someone's taking a picture, and the door rattles open. (Neat trick.) Gibbs gives it a long count of ten,
Back door of the van's been ajar this whole time and the hinges are greased, so the door is silent as DiNozzo swings it the rest of the way open. (DiNozzo's all business when it counts; that's why Gibbs puts up with his shit the rest of the time.) Then DiNozzo's out and running, weapon in hand. Ziva, McGee, Dr. Jackson, and Gibbs brings up the rear because point and drag are the two most dangerous positions in any squad. He knows perfectly well just because they've only seen three guys doesn't mean three is all there are.

He's just reached the edge of the building when he hears DiNozzo shout, "Freeze! Federal Agents!" and then there's a sound that takes Gibbs right the hell back to National and Trent Kort and then-Major Carter with a fucking ray gun. (Looks like Dr. Jackson was right. Great.) Even better: the sound's followed by a crash and gunfire.

Gibbs almost trips over DiNozzo as he comes through the door. DiNozzo's flat on his back and groggy, but he's not bleeding, so Gibbs grabs him by the collar and drags him behind a pile of boxes, then pokes his head out just long enough to get a look around. McGee's on one side of the floor. Ziva's on the other. (God only knows where Dr. Jackson is.) Their "sarcophagus" (a crate about the size of a refrigerator) is at the far end, still on its loading dolly. Gibbs figures that's because Dead Guy (and his two henchmen) are busy crowbarring it open. The important part is Dead Guy's standing in plain sight, a perfect target.

Sure enough, Ziva pops up from behind her pile of crates and takes a shot. There's some kind of purple flash. Dead Guy doesn't even flinch. (At least at National, the bullets had fucking hit McAvoy. He just didn't seem to care.) And now (this case just keeps getting better and better) Ziva's exposed her position and Dead Guy's two goons fire on it (blue lightning flares and sizzles; whatever they're shooting, it isn't guns). Ziva ducks back down, and Gibbs just almost breathes a sigh of relief, but that's before Dead Guy sweeps his hand out. There's that fucking sound again, and a bunch of stuff goes flying. Gibbs has a bad feeling Ziva's under it.

More gunfire. A shout. One of the other bad guys goes down (nice shooting, McGee).

By now DiNozzo's sitting up, muttering about trucks. Gibbs gets him on his feet and points him at the action. If the universe will cooperate for a minute or two (ha), Gibbs can work his way right and check on Ziva.

Naturally, that's when Dr. Jackson breaks cover.

She doesn't even have her weapon out. (What the fucking fuck?) And apparently she's decided now's a great time to give Dead Guy dancing lessons, because she wraps herself around his arm like a cat who doesn't want a bath and starts hauling at something. Dead Guy backhands her hard enough that the sound echoes the length of the warehouse, and her knees sag.

That's when Gibbs sees it. The thing he saw at National and told himself was a trick of the light. Dead Guy's eyes turn yellow -- a slow flare and fade like summer fireflies -- and suddenly Dead Guy doesn't look human at all.

Dr. Jackson isn't one of his people (she wrecked his whole fucking week, and it's not like he owes O'Neill a goddamn thing), and he knows it's a dumbshit move, but Gibbs isn't going to leave her twisting in the wind. He steps out into plain sight. Holds his gun up over his head. "Scott! Major Scott! I want to talk! We don't have to do this!"

He's at just the right angle to see McGee giving him a look somewhere in between "startled" and "horrified" (because Dr. Jackson sweet-talked all of them out of their body armor and maybe she's
been playing for the other team all along) but he doesn't think Dead Guy can see McGee. And hopefully Dead Guy thinks DiNozzo's still out. Dead Guy doesn't seem to be paying much attention to them anyway. He's dragged Dr. Jackson up against him. He's patting at her cheek. Her eyelids flicker. (Still alive, thank fuck.)

"Put down your weapon," Dead Guy says. His voice sounds garbled, like it's coming through some kind of filtered radio channel. McAvoy sounded like that at National. (McAvoy was a meatsuit. So is Scott.)

Gibbs kneels down slowly, sets the pistol on the floor. Stands back up carefully. You don't get your people killed, even when they've been incredibly fucking stupid.

And that's when things go from fucked up to really fucked up.

"Dani," Dead Guy says, sounding normal now. "Dani, it's me. Jack. You've got the shot, sweetheart. You've got it. There's Scott. Take him." Dead Guy slips her Beretta into her hand and folds her fingers around it. Dr. Jackson looks so relieved it makes him want to puke. She raises her weapon (points it right at him), and he knows his team is looking to him for a signal.

All he can think is she knew better than any of them what his team was walking into. O'Neill trained her. He hopes to hell his trust isn't misplaced.

She fires.

It takes Gibbs a millisecond or so to realize he's not fucking dead, which means Dr. Jackson loaded her Beretta with a bunch of goddamn blanks. She must have had this entire goddamn stupid plan in mind from word one, and if she doesn't get herself all dead before they get the bad guys squared away -- which at this point looks like it'll be a fucking miracle -- she and Gibbs are going to have a little chat about exactly what the cunting fuck she was thinking. But for now he's got his own part to play. He grabs his chest theatrically (thinks of the Westerns he spent hours watching as a kid) and falls to the ground. (Fucking ground gets harder every year.) Watches from beneath his lashes.

If Gibbs's bullshit spaghetti Western act is good enough to fool Dead Guy, it doesn't fool DiNozzo and McGee for a second. (Gibbs knows this because little Dr. Jackson isn't full of bullet holes.) He doesn't have long to wonder what the hell Dr. Jackson's planning for an encore. Suddenly there's something in her hand (can't make out what), and she jabs whatever the fuck it is into Dead Guy's leg, and the guy just topples over.

As usual (unless you believe the clowns in Hollywood), the end of the fight's pretty anticlimactic. Means they got lucky. Means no one's dead.

Someone (maybe DiNozzo, maybe McGee; hard to tell from where he's lying) takes advantage of the momentary confusion to shoot Henchman Number Two and the bastard goes down. Three for three, and Gibbs is peeling himself off the floor of the warehouse (age and treachery may win every time, but getting old really sucks; he knows he's going to feel every bruise in the morning) when he hears a familiar voice behind him. "Thought you guys could maybe use a little help, but it looks like you managed without us."

It's O'Neill (surprise) and he's brought his own sidekicks. Gibbs recognizes the former Major Carter, and the other guy with them (civilian) popped up in McGee's Alphabet Soup crawl yesterday. Gibbs is pretty sure his name is Barrett. Right now Gibbs doesn't give a flying fuck if he's Frank Sinatra.

Carter and Barrett fan out, shadowing his team. Gibbs heads for Dr. Jackson. He's pretty sure he could drop a safe on her head without her noticing; she's staring at O'Neill with a look of shock, then
she looks down at Dead Guy and skitters away from him like she's just seen the world's biggest spider on her birthday cake. Gibbs grabs her arm and drags her the rest of the way away, then snatches the gun out of her hand.

"What the hell did you think you were doing?" he snarls at her. "Blanks? Next time you decide to pull some idiotic dumbshit grandstand play like this, you clear it with me first, you got that?" He suddenly realizes he's shaking her, and stops.

"I-- I would -- wouldn't -- h-have," she stammers, and she looks like she's about to cry. He lets go of her arm.

"Wouldn't have shot at you if she didn't think she'd kill you," O'Neill translates for Gibbs. "Power of positive thinking." O'Neill makes it sound like a joke, but Gibbs suspects Dr. Jackson is in deep kimchee. Knowing that doesn't actually improve his mood much: after he last 48 hours, he feels like he's entitled to be the one who hands Dr. Jackson her ass in a sack.

"Jack," Dr. Jackson says, hugging herself tightly. "Hi."

"Ziva's okay!" McGee calls, and DiNozzo starts whining about needing aspirin and an ice pack. (DiNozzo bitches when he isn't hurt and dummies up when he is; it's a damn useful diagnostic.) Colonel Carter secures Dead Guy with a set of cuffs that look like they could hold Hulk Hogan, then duct-tapes his mouth shut for good measure and announces that the prisoner's secure (she also announces his sidekicks aren't Jaffa, whatever difference that makes).

"We done?" Gibbs asks, because he knows this script. O'Neill and friends are going to leave with his prisoners, the Cone of Silence will descend like the Hammer of Thor, and NCIS will get to wait in cheerful ignorance for the next time it gets blindsided with a bunch of Top Secret shit.

"Sir," Colonel Carter says, holding up something she pulled out of Dead Guy's pocket.

"Oh, I thought your people might like to stay for the big finish," O'Neill says, taking the whatever-it-is from Carter. "Care to take a little trip?"

Gibbs figures they'll load up the prisoners and pile into whatever government vehicles O'Neill brought with him, so he says: "Sure." (In for a penny, in for a fucking pound.) He starts to regret that decision when O'Neill tells Barrett to stay with the prisoners and then splits the rest of them into two groups: O'Neill with DiNozzo, McGee, and Carter; Gibbs with Dr. Jackson and Ziva. O'Neill looks them over with a critical eye. "Gonna be a little cozy even with four," he says cheerfully. While Gibbs is puzzling over that one, O'Neill does something with whatever the hell it was Carter handed him.

What happens next has got to be the weirdest goddamn thing Gibbs has ever seen. Weirdier than "of course I'll try real bullets first"; weirder than every fucking bizarre full-moon case he's ever worked. Out of nowhere these giant fucking rings come crashing in through the skylight, spraying glass everywhere, and land right on top of them. DiNozzo swears, the alien Slinky from hell takes a trip back up through the skylight, and everyone's gone. (Dr. Jackson's just standing there like this happens all the goddamn time.)

Gibbs can't help but notice -- now when it's too late to do any good -- that O'Neill (Mr. Take-Charge, as always) mixed his people in with NCIS's, and each group has a Guy In Charge. He wonders what the hell O'Neill thinks they might run into on the other side.

"Come on," Dr. Jackson says, walking over to the broken glass. "The rings will take us up to the
Now here's the fun thing about Dr. Jackson, Gibbs is starting to realize: she always assumes you have some fucking clue what the hell she's talking about. Regardless, he's not leaving his people at O'Neill's mercy, so he starts walking and motions Ziva to follow. Dr. Jackson shifts the three of them until they're all standing shoulder to shoulder and back to back. Then she pulls out a radio and says, "Okay."

He's just about to ask her who the hell she's talking to, when the same wall of noisy metal hits the ground around them. There's a flash of light, and then it goes away again (thank fuck).

"Hey," Dr. Jackson says with interest. "Ha'tak."

They aren't in the warehouse. Gibbs looks down. He and Ziva and Dr. Jackson are standing in the middle of a big silver circle on the floor. They're all in some kind of big, badly-lit storeroom with a big stone circle at one end. Nice to know storerooms still look like storerooms even when they're all done up in Sci-Fi Cheesy.

O'Neill and Carter and the rest of his people are waiting a safe distance away (DiNozzo and McGee look a little shell-shocked, but they'll live).

"The ship must be shielded," Colonel Carter says, looking up from the crate she's rooting through. "The Hammond's in orbit, and they haven't picked up any trace of it."

"And here's why they went for our bait," Dr. Jackson says, waving at … nothing. "Their sarc would be here, if they had one."

Colonel Carter nods, but she's frowning. "These guys seem to have a lot more of our stuff than we thought," she says, gesturing at a big gold box with the lid off.

"Not anymore, Carter," O'Neill says. "Weapons?"

Carter shakes her head and O'Neill shrugs philosophically. "Okay, boys and girls. Let's secure the ship. Three groups." He glances at Gibbs. Professional courtesy.


O'Neill nods and brandishes a radio of his own. "Stay in touch."

Colonel Carter walks over to the door. There's an eight-button keypad with a big button beside it. Apparently she's one to try the obvious solution first (no surprise; O'Neill trained her too), so she just presses the big button. The door opens. "We'll take the engineering section," she says.

"Barracks and flight deck," O'Neill answers.

"That leaves us cells and quarters," Dr. Jackson says. (Sounds like a jolly little holiday to Gibbs.) "Meet you guys on the pel'tac?"

O'Neill nods. Carter moves out first, (McGee in tow; he looks like he can't decide whether to be thrilled, stunned, or just really goddamn cranky Abby's been right about the aliens all these years). They're followed by O'Neill and DiNozzo, who has his game face on. Gibbs is pretty sure the foremost thought in DiNozzo's mind is must not let the three-star get killed. Good boy.

"Let's go," Dr. Jackson says. She pauses when she gets to the doorway. "Uh…radios?"
Ziva and Gibbs each have one (never go on a stakeout without them). Dr. Jackson takes them, adjusts the freq on both, and does a radio check before she hands them back.

"Um," she says. "If you see something that isn't us … kill it, okay?" Not exactly a pep talk, but given the last couple of days, Gibbs wasn't really expecting comforting words out of Dr. Jackson. (Crime scene. Think of it like securing a fucking crime scene. Which it is, since there's stolen property to be recovered. Even if they are on a motherfucking spaceship.)

"Yeah," he says to Dr. Jackson. "Okay."

Hard to tell from her face exactly what Ziva's thinking (whatever the Hebrew word for "inscrutable" is, it's probably her middle name) and she's just as professional as always as they clear room after room, but her eyes have that shuttered look they get when she's pondering something. (Not that Gibbs really blames her; a person'd have to be pretty fucking oblivious not to be having Deep Thoughts after being beamed up to a goddamn alien spaceship.)

Just about the only plus here is that so far the ship seems to be deserted. The lighting (which sucks) and the weird fucking alien angles on everything here are giving him a headache. Just about the time Gibbs is pretty sure they're on their six hundred and seventy millionth identical section of the crew quarters -- or as Dr. Jackson so charmingly refers to it, the Herpetology Hilton -- Colonel Carter radios down. Gibbs only understands maybe every third word of what she's saying (babble babble babble), but he gets the gist.

The ship (the fucking alien spacecraft, and what the hell happened to his nice normal week?) is pretty much crap. Colonel Carter thinks it was probably stolen from some guys called the Lucians. (Gibbs figures it's safest to just assume any word he doesn't recognize means Something Bad and move on from there.) According to Colonel Carter, the only thing working on this tub is something called the "cloak," which apparently explains why the General Hammond ("One of our spaceships," Dr. Jackson tells him helpfully) couldn't find it, but that doesn't mean their work is done, so they keep walking, and clearing rooms, and walking some more. This sure as hell isn't a small ship, though Dr. Jackson says they come much bigger. He's seriously thinking about making some crack about little boxes made out of ticky-tacky (even though the stupid jokes were always O'Neill's stock in trade, not his) when the scenery abruptly changes.

"And now," Dr. Jackson says, "the fun part." She's trying to keep her voice light and bright, but she isn't managing it this time, and Ziva's looking at her. (It takes a lot to put one over on Ziva.) Dr. Jackson gestures at what looks like a bunch of big alcoves set into the wall. He'd think they were cells, except the whole front is open. "Guest quarters," she says, waving at them offhandedly. She pauses at one and presses a button (with enough of a pause and a flourish Gibbs knows something's about to happen). Bars of light shoot out across the front, making a noise like a mosquito zapper. (Turns out they're cells after all. Fucking aliens.)

"Never touch those," Dr. Jackson says solemnly, and turns the bug-zapper off again.

"These are holding cells," Ziva says (stating the obvious. Not something she usually does; then again, today really hasn't been her day either).

"Yeah," Dr. Jackson says. "C'mon. Let's check out the rec room."

The door is open. (Most of the doors have been. Maybe it's some kind of default setting. Maybe the owners don't give a shit about burglars. Who the fuck knows?) They walk inside, and for just a second, Gibbs isn't entirely sure what he's seeing. It's like one of those goddamn optical illusion puzzles (like the jungle, like Warsaw in the fog, and he doesn't even want to go there), except how they're walking through it and at any moment someone might jump out and shoot them.
First thing that draws his eye is movement. He tenses, until he realizes it's just fire, flickering in the breeze from the ventilation system. He's seen these fancy tiki-torches all over the fucking ship, but this is the first time he's seen one lit. Must be safe, because Dr. Jackson doesn't give them a second look.

Second thing is chains. Chains crossing the ceiling -- there's some kind of pulley system up there -- and there are bars with manacles, and manacles set in to the back wall, and his gut is racing ahead of his brain on this one. (He doesn't miss how Dr. Jackson has already looked everywhere in this room -- up, down, into every weird-angle corner and every shadow.)

"Looks like they had it all set up and ready to go," Dr. Jackson says brightly.

There's a big gold oblong altar-looking thing in the middle of the room (he's trying to remember which ex it was -- number two or number three? -- who had the interior-decoration bug, and he knows he's just trying to keep himself from thinking about what this place is). There's a bunch of shit artistically arranged on the kitchen island from hell (like dental tools, except not really). Dr. Jackson picks one of them up. The end sizzles (lighting in a bottle; just like all the other Overseas crap he's seen. If he never sees another one in this lifetime, it will be too fucking soon).

"Goa'uld fire stick," she says in the bright and chirpy voice of a museum tour guide. "You can torture someone for hours with one of these and not leave a mark. Knives -- can't beat the classics -- tal'vak acid -- somebody's creative -- neural inducer -- oh, that's Lucian--"

"Enough," Ziva says sharply, and Dr. Jackson looks at her, eyes wide, jaw set. Then she nods, turning away so they can't see her face. She's quiet for a moment. He's pretty sure he knows what Ziva would be saying right now, if Ziva didn't think there was a time and a place for everything. Finally Dr. Jackson says: "Yeah. It's clear. Let's go," and they walk back out into the corridor. This time (how is this night different from all other nights; yeah, he's definitely been hanging out with Ziva too much) she taps the keypad so the doors close behind them. They aren't side-by-side doors. These come at the opening from all sides, interlocking triangles. She gets back on her radio and checks in with O'Neill.

"Nobody here but us chickens," O'Neill says. His voice is light the same way he used to make it when he was either really goddamn pissed off or scared as hell and trying to turn it into a joke (the same way little Dr. Jackson talks about war and Apocalypse, and guess where she learned it?) and right now Gibbs can't really blame him, given that O'Neill's Happy Space Friends have apparently been way more successful than O'Neill thought at whatever the fuck they were doing. This whole damned time Gibbs's gut, and probably O'Neill's too, has been shouting at him that Dead Guy made too many Amateur Hour mistakes to be the brains of this operation. There has to be someone else pulling the strings on this fucking job. And they haven't found whoever it is, yet, and that really bites.

Dr. Jackson either doesn't realize this or doesn't give a rat's ass. "C'mon," she says cheerfully. "Pel'tac time."

Hetty (and why the hell does everything keep coming back to her?) always told her ducklings it wasn't polite to use foreign words in front of people who didn't speak the language (it makes people really fucking nervous if nothing else), but Gibbs is starting to get a feel for little Dr. Jackson, and it probably hasn't even occurred to her pel'tac isn't part of the working vocabulary of normal people. Doesn't seem to have occurred to O'Neill either, but ten years is a long time at the war, and Gibbs'd been thinking at least half in Russian after four. (He's starting to really envy normal people. Normal people who aren't going to come home from a little field trip with O'Neill and spend the rest of their natural lives having hot and cold running nightmares about fucking alien invasions.)
Pel'tac, as it turns out, is Happy Space Friends for "bridge," but this sure as hell isn't the utilitarian bridge-on-a-Naval-ship he's used to seeing; no, whoever built and decorated this bucket was really fucking impressed with themselves. The place is wall-to-wall gold and platinum and precious stones, and there's a goddamned throne right there in the middle. (Hand to fucking God, the place looks like something out of a bad '80s sci-fi movie, only with fewer big-titted blondes in bikinis.) He ought to say something (say anything) to O'Neill, but the view stops him short. (View from the top; best seats in the house.) Earth beneath them, brown and green and blue and white, glowing bright against all the darkness.

McGee's standing next to Carter, but for a change, McGee's actually fucking speechless, and even DiNozzo has been reduced to occasionally muttering, "wow," and "damn." Ziva's standing right next to Gibbs, just as still as always, but her eyes are wide.

For once, no one spoils the moment by talking.

"Pretty incredible, huh?" Dr. Jackson has drifted over to stand behind him, and her voice is soft. "I'll never forget seeing it for the first time."

(Neither will he. At least he'll have one bright memory to go along with all the fucking nightmares.)

"Yeah," he agrees. "Yeah."

"This is what it's all for," she says.

Gibbs is pretty sure that's all the apology he's going to get. Right now, it's enough.

#

Colonel Carter announces she'll be bringing some specialists aboard to see what can be salvaged; it's their cue that playtime's over. She and O'Neill have one of those quick mental telepathy conversations (probably about all that fucking voodoo science shit in the hold), and O'Neill tells her not to forget to write.

There's a "set of rings" (apparently that's the actual name of the alien fucking Slinky) here on the bridge. O'Neill goes down with the rest of Gibbs's team in the first wave. Dr. Jackson hugs Colonel Carter goodbye, and Gibbs thinks of Kate and Mike and soldiers (Marines) who become closer than families. Then he and Dr. Jackson step into the rings, and it's up and down and they're back in the warehouse again.

He takes a quick glance around. DiNozzo's floundering a little, Ziva's locked down, and McGee looks like someone's just given him a pony. They'll do. Top's back on the crate Dead Guy was so interested in. Still glass all over the floor, but you can't have everything.

"Dani says CIA's interested in the case," O'Neill remarks (as if travel by Slinky is so normal it can be forgotten the instant it's over).

"Kort's been leaning on Vance." If O'Neill can't fill in the blanks, screw him.

"I'm thinking if we process these guys through NCIS, Langley might be moved to tell us why they're so interested," O'Neill says.

And Gibbs knows he's being given a chance to ditch this whole fucking mess right here and now, tell O'Neill alien invasions aren't NCIS business, let him make Dead Guy and his little buddies vanish. It'd be the smart thing to do. Vance would be tickled pink (at least until he found out Langley hadn't caught the bouquet).
"Still our case," he says instead, and O'Neill nods.

Sun's already partway up when they walk out of the warehouse. (Been a long damn night and Gibbs is looking forward to writing this report just about as much as he had the report for the goddamn McAvoy case. Hundred bucks says the whole team's going to have to sign about a ream and a half worth of NDAs when this bullshit is over, not that anybody's stupid enough to talk about their visit to the alien spaceship.) DiNozzo and McGee help Barrett cart the prisoners out to their nice anonymous grey van. Dead Guy's still out cold. Dr. Jackson looks like she'd rather ride back with NCIS than the NID, but O'Neill gives her a look and she follows Barrett out to their van.

"Meet you back at the ranch," O'Neill says.

"Saddle up," Gibbs tells his team.

O'Neill's van is waiting for them at the security station; Gibbs vouches him through and they roll on in to the garage. When they start the unloading, Dead Guy is conscious, but quieter than a mouth full of duct tape can account for. The hired help bitches about needing a hospital and wanting a lawyer, which is just too damned bad: O'Neill's finally been moved to drop another name (Homeworld Security? Who names this shit?) and assured them its powers make Homeland Security look like a grade school hall monitor's. So they hustle them on in to I-1, 2, and 3. (Separate interrogation rooms for all. Divide and conquer was Mike's Rule #1, and it's still a good one.)

O'Neill calls first dibs and picks Dead Guy so Gibbs and Ziva split the henchmen. From the look on Ziva's face, this isn't going to be any trip to Disneyland for Henchman Number One. Gibbs figures he'll let Henchman Number Two stew for a while he sees what Ziva can come up with. (And maybe send DiNozzo out for coffee in half an hour when the good place opens; if Langley's going to play the outraged virgin today he figures he's entitled.)

He settles in to watch Ziva work her voodoo on the poor suffering bastard in I-2, and he's starts to think he might get out of this week (this case) with his skin (sanity) intact. And just as he's remembering (thinking about her again) how Saint Hetty always used to say that when things look like they're going too smoothly, they are, the door to Observation Two opens.

"Agent Gibbs?" Vance says from the doorway. He gives I-2 a glance of displeasure, but apparently handing Gibbs his head is more important than fucking up their interrogation. He steps back into the hall and Gibbs follows him.

Normally, this would be goatfuck as usual, since Vance has a habit of turning up right where he's least wanted, but 0630 is an hour earlier than Vance has ever rolled in, and the stakeout paperwork hit his desk last night after he was good and gone. (Gibbs would give a whole helluva lot to know who whistled the good Director to heel today.)

"I don't believe I signed off on any request for your team to stake out a warehouse, Agent Gibbs. Not that it would have been possible for me to do so." Vance's eyes are hard, and his glare is set at a couple of notches above "really fucking pissed off," but at least his eyes don't glow in the dark. (Thanks to Dead Guy, Gibbs has a new gold standard for well and truly screwed.)

"Pursuant to our ongoing investigation," he snaps.

"Air Force jurisdiction."

"Joint operation with the NID."

"Unauthorized use of NCIS resources."
"Time-critical operation."

They're standing in the middle of the hallway spitting buzz-phrases at each other, and it's all just this side of insubordinate (bad agent no biscuit hand in your gun and your badge), and he can't help but think of Jenny with the longing of a starving man for bread, because Jenny would have flayed him alive, but she wouldn't have fucked him over and sold them out.

"I'm sorry, Agent Gibbs," Vance says, and there's no fucking way in hell he's sorry, "but this isn't going to fly this time. This is CIA's case, and these are--"

"Oh, hey, Leon. Didn't see you out here. Early bird catches the worm, huh? Always figured the worm ought to sleep in, how 'bout you?"

O'Neill's walking out of Observation One (not I-1 where they put Dead Guy; interesting) and smiling at Vance, and Gibbs isn't quite sure what he's seeing (clown or predator, Chicago or Poland), so he has no idea what the hell Vance sees. (Vance never knew O'Neill Before: before Hetty goddamn Lange, before Leningrad and Poland and all the way-stations with signs saying "Danger: Bridge Out".)

"Sorry about stepping on your toes. Didn't want to leave a trail until we had this locked up tight," O'Neill says, patting Vance companionably on the shoulder and turning it into an arm across the back to walk him up the corridor away from Interrogation. "Let me read you in and, oh yeah, couple NDAs to go with that, just a formality; paperwork's a bitch, but wha'cha gonna do--"

It's the patter of the magician (O'Neill was always fucking good at it, even when they were kids back in Mother Russia), and Gibbs knows Vance hates to look like a fool, so he's not going to dig in his heels and bitch right here in front of the hired help. (Gibbs also knows it'll come back to haunt him later, but if there's one thing he learned at Saint Hetty's knee it's that it's sometimes enough to postpone disaster for a week, a day, an hour.) When he's sure Vance isn't going to make a break for it, Gibbs goes back into Observation Two.

"Of course I would not do such things on American soil, Mr. Cole," Ziva is saying, "But you know there are many places this conversation could take place, do you not?" Ziva sounds calm and totally reasonable. Cole looks like he's about ready to call for his mommy. Good.

"Look," Cole says, and his voice is just this side of shaking, "me and Ken -- Kenny Judson -- we just work for the guy. We used to work for Farrow-Marshall, you know, security, and when the company was -- uh -- restructured, the boss hired us. That's it."

Ziva leans forward just a little bit, smiling pleasantly, and Cole leans as far back in his chair as he can possibly get without scooting away from the table. Clearly he's dealt with people like Ziva before.

"You realize you are being held as a terrorist," Ziva says conversationally. "We could simply drop you down a dark hole somewhere and forget about you for a little while; it is not actually illegal. But perhaps if you were a bit more, ah, forthcoming…"

Cole swallows hard and makes the smart choice. "Yeah, sure, yeah. The way it is, me and Kenny were working for Farrow-Marshall, but about a year ago the boss, Mr. Balim, he doesn't come in to work one day, and it's all over the news and all of a sudden nobody knows what's going on, or who's in charge, or… anything. So I get dumped out on my ass along with just about all the security guys. Well, you know how it is," he says (clearly thinking Ziva's going to fall for his bullshit sob-story). "So I get a tip from this guy Philby -- some kind of suit at Farrow-Marshall, I guess; I saw him around a couple times -- and he puts me on to Scott, so I bring Kenny in. All we ever did was what he told us to do, lady. Sure, maybe it wasn't exactly legal -- but if Scott's a terrorist, I don't know
what he was planning. I'm just the muscle."

Ziva looks absolutely thrilled to be called "lady." She also looks like she thinks Cole is holding something back. "And I suppose," Ziva says (still smiling, still pleasant), "you had no idea you were helping to aid in an alien invasion." (Two days ago, Gibbs wouldn't have imagined Ziva could be using the phrase "alien invasion" with a straight face.)

Cole fakes a laugh. He tries to put on his best "you're crazy" face but he can't quite sell it. "Lady," he says (and here they go with the "lady" again; Cole should be more careful), "I have no idea what the fuck you're talking about. You--"

Ziva's hand slams down on the table (gonna be damn lucky to get out of there with dry pants, sonny boy). "I have seen the ship," she says. Her voice is even; Ziva knows there's a time and a place for shouting. "Do not try to tell me you have not."

"Okay," Cole says (they're down to the bargaining phase; won't be long now). "Maybe I've seen a few things. But if someone offered you the chance to live forever and do whatever the hell you want just for helping him maybe bust into a few places and put the arm on some geeks, you'd do it, right? You'd have to be fucking stupid to not."

(Apparently no one gave this asshole the briefing Dr. Jackson gave Gibbs on the goddamned alien body-snatchers, because he's clearly a little fuzzy on the fact the payoff is getting cored like an apple and turned into a suit of fucking meat.)

"I would say the reward one is offered does not matter." Ziva's voice is low and harsh. "To betray a country, that is bad, and there are penalties. To betray the human race? That is far worse. As is the punishment." She doesn't explain what the "punishment" is, but Ziva can make you think things you didn't even know you knew.

"Hey, look, no, you got this all wrong -- nobody said anything about treason -- I mean, Kenny an' me talked about it -- it was all his idea -- he thought we should do it -- swear to God, lady, I didn't think anything bad would happen--"

It's all over now but the paperwork: Cole's going to give up everything down to boxers or briefs, and Ziva knows all the right questions to ask, so Gibbs goes down the hall to Observation Three.

It was supposed to be empty -- Gibbs put everyone in either Observation or Interrogation to keep them off the floor (just in case of random attacks of Leon Vance; turns out that was a good call) -- McGee was in Oh-Three, and he chucked DiNozzo in Oh-One, and now here's Gibbs in Oh-Three with no McGee and DiNozzo looking like he's just found out where babies come from.

"Hey, Boss," DiNozzo says. He laughs the way he always does when he's just about to say something true and doesn't want anyone to believe it. "And here I thought Ziva was scary." Apparently DiNozzo's finally figured out the good doctor is a real piece of work. No point in rubbing his nose in it.

"Ziva's guy's spilling his guts. Says this guy's Kenny Judson. Made out he was the brains. Both of 'em former Farrow-Marshall security, recruited by some guy named Philby who hooked them up with--" he almost says "Dead Guy" but catches himself just in time "--Scott." He looks at DiNozzo. "You want to take Judson?" Work always settles DiNozzo. They have that in common. It's one of the many reasons he puts up with so much of DiNozzo's shit.

"Thanks, Boss," DiNozzo says. His grin (this time) is pretty much genuine.
Gibbs walks out and sees McGee coming back up the hall, two cups (from the good place; smart boy) in his hands. He grabs one of them, nods at McGee, and goes up the hall to Observation One.

O'Neill's still nowhere in sight, but (surprise) Dr. Jackson's in I-1, informing Dead Guy matter-of-factly that neither she nor his host -- a Marine committed to ridding the galaxy of snakes, she explains helpfully -- are particularly invested in the host's continued survival. When Gibbs looks up at the monitor he really doesn't like the things he sees in her smile; he's thought since the moment she dropped the bimbo act she was on the edge of coming unwrapped. When she finally goes over the edge he thinks there'll be somebody's blood on the walls. No help for it though; O'Neill's the one holding Dr. Jackson's leash, and this is O'Neill's show. Gibbs made his peace a long time ago with the things the good guys do so the civilians can sleep safe at night. He's just settled in to watch when Oh-One's door opens.

"Your Director's a real piece of work, you know?" O'Neill grumbles, closing the door and leaning against the wall. "Kinda wish he was a little less interested in kissing CIA's ass."

"Yeah," Gibbs agrees neutrally. (Watching Dr. Jackson on the other side of the mirror, he thinks Vance isn't the only piece of work in the building.) "He's been trying to hand off this case to CIA from the start. God knows why."

O'Neill grimaces sympathetically, and just for a moment it's almost like the old days: Jack and Jethro against the whole goddamn world. (They shared bad vodka and good caviar after that fucking shootout in Leningrad, and played poker -- Jenny kicked both their asses and then kissed Jack on the cheek.) But there's a tightness behind his eyes that hints O'Neill's not nearly as chipper as he'd like Gibbs to think. He's still not sure what he sees in O'Neill's face. Maybe Chicago, maybe Poland. Maybe some other fucking thing. There was a time (a long fucking time ago) when they'd been honest with each other, but that was before a gun, a woman, and a choice Gibbs has spent the last couple of decades wishing he hadn't needed to make. (O'Neill never called him "Jethro" again. Not even at Jenny's funeral. But he's willing to bet O'Neill still calls Hetty "tyotia").

There's a moment of silence (In I-1, Dr. Jackson is naming a lot of names Gibbs doesn't know; apparently she's telling Dead Guy everything she knows; great technique there, Doc). Finally, O'Neill says: "Vance has some connections that might explain why he doesn't want NCIS involved. He sure wasn't thrilled to hear what I had to say, but Homeworld pretty much trumps everyone, so he's just going to have to grease up and bend over."

A few more pieces come together (and Gibbs really fucking hates how far out of the loop he's feeling just now). "You know," he says, "I always thought Vance and Kort hated each other's guts, but they've been awfully buddy-buddy here the last couple of years." Ever since La Grenouille and the goatfuck that ended in Jenny's funeral.

"Never actually met the fella," O'Neill says. "But it's starting to sound like I really should."

That's the end of the conversation, at least for now. They both glance through the one-way glass into I-1 just in time to see Dead Guy's eyes flash again. It's creepy as fuck. Dr. Jackson gets to her feet and leans forward, palms pressed against the table. (Ziva would slam her hands against the tabletop to make the suspect jump; Dr. Jackson has a different style.) She's still talking to Dead Guy, and it takes Gibbs a moment to realize the barking guttural sounds aren't German, aren't Russian. Her voice is rising. Gibbs doesn't think the rage he hears in it is an act.

"And that would be my cue," O'Neill says. His voice is easy, and his movements look unhurried, but he's out one door and in the other in a matter of seconds.

Dr. Jackson breaks off when the door opens. Gibbs thinks if it had been anyone else she'd have
ordered them the fuck out, but O'Neill waves a hand, and she straightens up and backs off. Moves out of sight, but the monitor shows her leaning against the wall beside the one-way mirror, arms folded.

O'Neill sits down at the table, looking free and easy. "General Jack O'Neill. And you are?"

"My name is unimportant," Dead Guy says in his garbled-radio voice.

"Oh, we like names around here," O'Neill says affably (ignoring the whole "god" thing). "SG-1, Stargate Command … Ba'al. You've probably heard of Ba'al. System Lord? Beard? Well, ex-System Lord, since he's dead. But you knew that, right? That's why you're here."

Dead Guy tries to stand up, but he's shackled to the table, and the table's bolted to the floor. (Too bad for you, buddy.) He growls something else in not-German, not-Russian.

"I will fill your corpse with my larvae. My legions will lay waste to your planet," Dr. Jackson translates, sounding bored.

"Yeah, well, see, the problem with that is we've got your legions," O'Neill says, in a tone that suggests he's just pointing this out to be helpful. "All two of them. Not much of a legion, you know, but hey. This is Washington. We know all about staffing cutbacks. And we've got your ship -- not much of a ship, is it? -- and -- oh yeah -- we've got you. So now you can either make things easy on yourself -- or not."

Dead Guy thumps back down into his chair. His face works, and all of a sudden he looks scared. "Jack -- Jack, please, you gotta help me! You don't know what he's like! My guys are still out there! Please!" He sounds terrified. He sounds human.

Dr. Jackson's still leaning against the wall. She's trying hard to look as bored as she did a minute ago, but it's clear Dead Guy's act's got her rattled. (Gibbs can't help but feel a little twinge of sympathy for her; she's had a pretty rough fucking day. Week. Life. Whatever.)

"Sorry," O'Neill says, and his voice is cold. "Not buyin' it. Wanna try again?"

Dead Guy replies (again) in not-German, not-Russian, and Gibbs thinks it must be pretty fucking impossible to say anything polite in Happy Space Friends lingo. "You have no idea who you're dealing with," Dr. Jackson translates, managing to sound like she's criticizing Dead Guy for a total lack of originality. (Gibbs has to admit that as lines goes, that one's pretty goddamn overused.)

O'Neill apparently agrees, because he snorts. "You snakes all just read from the same script?" He shakes his head, shrugs. "Okay, fine, I'll bite. Who exactly am I dealing with, your "lordship"?"

Dead Guy draws himself up and his eyes flash. Problem is, it's pretty fucking hard to look intimidating when you're chained to the goddamn table. O'Neill certainly doesn't look cowed, and Dr. Jackson just looks really pissed off.

"I am Lord Reshef," Dead Guy announces, in English this time. "You would be wise to kneel before your god." (Dr. Jackson actually laughs at that, and it isn't a pleasant sound.)

O'Neill just raises his eyebrows and grins, and Gibbs thinks it's possibly the scariest look he's ever seen on O'Neill's face. "In case you haven't noticed, your worship, I'm not the one chained to the table."

"Your insolence is disappointing," Reshef intones solemnly. Gibbs decides he prefers the moniker "Dead Guy"; at least it's more fun.
"Yeah, well," Jack says, and he's still grinning (and it's less like a smile and more like a predator showing his teeth before he moves in for the kill). "You'd better get used to disappointment, buddy."

Dr. Jackson doesn't even bother to translate Dead Guy's answer, because it looks like O'Neill at least gets the gist.

O'Neill shrugs (well all right, if that's the way you want it) and pushes his chair back from the table. "Fine," he says. "If all you feel like doing is spouting the snake party line, I may as well let her have you back. I'm afraid she doesn't like you very much." He nods in Dr. Jackson's direction.

Dr. Jackson smiles (and suddenly all Gibbs can think of is that Abs thinks she's a friend, that he brought this woman down to the lab and she gave Abby presents) and starts barking at Reshef (and her expression is hungry, and he knows too damned well what it's like to know in your bones only killing will bring you peace).

Reshef tries to get up again (no joy); tries to shout her down. He can't do that, but he can drown her out. (O'Neill, Gibbs notices, hasn't actually left the room.) Reshef rants for a couple of minutes, then Dr. Jackson straightens up and starts toward the door.

"Do not turn your back on me!" Reshef yells. "My enemies will avenge me!"

She opens her mouth to say something, but O'Neill puts an arm around her shoulders and walks her out.

#

They don't come back into I-1. Gibbs figures they're looking for a little quality time. He watches Dead Guy rant for a couple of minutes while he tries to make up his mind whether to believe everything he's seen and heard since Monday morning or chalk it up to temporary insanity.

He can explain all of it one way or another except the spaceship (and with a little work, he can explain that too). But looking into I-1, watching someone who (from all reports) was a damned fine Marine scream and foam at the mouth and haul at his cuffs until the table vibrates, he decides what he really hopes is he gets the chance to forget it. Because his gut knows that isn't Scott in there. That's the enemy. And this isn't the kind of war he knows how to fight. (Once, maybe, in a far country, but at least then the Bad Guys hadn't been space aliens.)

Then Dead Guy settles down to wait, and that's even creepier than the tantrum, so Gibbs goes to see what Hetty's little boy and the good doctor are up to.

#

They're down by the vending machines. Public space, but it isn't quite 0730 yet and the working day doesn't start here for another hour. They're standing close enough to make Gibbs pretty sure he knows who the "boyfriend" is Dr. Jackson mentioned yesterday (not that he gives a rat's ass), but they aren't looking at each other. Dr. Jackson's staring at her feet. O'Neill's looking off at nothing. Neither of them's saying a word.

He clears his throat. O'Neill looks up; Dr. Jackson doesn't.

"Looks like we may have a little problem," O'Neill says, and he smiles like it's nothing to worry about, business as usual. "Let's take a walk."

When you're trying to keep the Director from listening in, there are a limited number of places to go if you want to stay in the building. They settle on Autopsy. There's nothing pending, so they'll have
it to themselves for half an hour or so. Gibbs isn't sure whether or not to be happy he's getting read in.

Apparently this is Dr. Jackson's show. She leans against one of the tables, arms folded, staring at nothing. There's a bruise on the side of her face where Dead Guy clocked her. Gibbs has the impression she doesn't think it's worth noticing.

O'Neill takes something out of his pocket and waves it at her. She looks up and nods. O'Neill doesn't bother to explain (typical).

"I don't think I can get the whole story out of Reshef," Dr. Jackson says. She's back to staring at the floor. "It might tell us more later, but I doubt it. We've got enough, though." She glances up then, taking a silent meeting with O'Neill, and Gibbs's gut clenches as he realizes he's going to get the whole deal this time.

"The Goa'uld we knew as Ba'al -- also known as Kevin Balim -- was using Farrow-Marshall to take over Earth. We'd always thought Ba'al implanted Sergeant MacAvoy, but it never made sense -- MacAvoy was trying to expose Farrow-Marshall's traffic in Offworld technology, not help Ba'al cover things up -- but it does make sense now. MacAvoy's snake wasn't working for Ba'al. It was working for the other one."

The only thing more fun than a secret war is a secret two front war. Gibbs keeps his mouth shut. Dr. Jackson isn't finished.

"Anyway. We took out Ba'al, but Ba'al had an associate. Another snake. Here on Earth. Apparently not covered under--"

O'Neill shakes his head slightly and she stops. Okay, not the whole deal. Gibbs isn't sure he wants it anyway.

"Whoever this associate is -- Reshef didn't give me a name -- called Reshef in. It was risky for Reshef to come here wearing Scott, but the associate clearly thought it was worth the risk. It brought Reshef in to help it do… Well, aside from stealing a bunch of stuff, that part isn't quite clear. But that's not the problem. The problem is the other snake who wants Earth. That's why Reshef tipped its hand -- it wasn't the only one after the stuff at Area 51. The other one spoofed our communications, decoyed Ike and Jorge off the rez, then leaked the intel to Reshef. Reshef used NCIS to pick them up. The rest you know."

"So there's another--" he starts to say "body-snatcher" and stops himself "--bad guy we haven't found yet."

"Two, actually," Dr. Jackson says (sounding like she's correcting a minor inaccuracy, nothing to worry about). "Ba'al's nameless associate, and the one who set Reshef up. The thing is--" she frowns, like what she's about to say is even weirder than usual "--Reshef gave me the other one's name. And it isn't a Goa'uld name. It isn't a name at all. It's "Serminwe". It means "herder". Sheep-herder, specifically."

He looks at O'Neill, who hasn't been saying much. It's nice to be kept in the loop (even this far), but it's a first for O'Neill, so he can't help but wonder why. Alien invasions aren't part of NCIS's mandate.

"So we see who comes looking for these guys," O'Neill says. "It'll be either one snake or the other."

"You figure one of 'em's CIA?" he asks. Because Vance and Kort have both been banging on him to
hand the case over to CIA since the beginning.

He never finds out what O'Neill -- or Dr. Jackson -- would have said. The door to Autopsy opens, and Ducky walks in. He blinks in surprise at the sight of the living here in his domain. And the moment for disclosure is past.

#

Gibbs doesn't see the last of the Air Force (Homeworld) until mid-afternoon. O'Neill vanishes early. Dr. Jackson sticks around for another hour or so (mostly to tell him Reshef isn't in I-1 any more -- but it's okay -- and he can do whatever he wants with the minions; partly to get him and his team to sign stacks of NDAs that say they can all be shot for thinking). She hands off to Colonel Davis, who's followed by AFOSI and NID, along with someone from CIA (Kort apparently has better things to do today) waving papers and demanding Allan Scott, Kenneth Judson, and Owen Cole be turned over to Langley (all he needs is Fornell showing up to make his alphabet soup complete). Vance has them all up in the Conference Room to sort it out. NID claims prior jurisdiction over Scott (and makes it stick, that's interesting), AFOSI goes home empty-handed (no surprises there), CIA gets the hired help. At least Ziva and DiNozzo got a confession out of the Wonder Twins so they can close the books on Croft and Mundy. Everything else Cole and Judson confessed to disappears into the Cone of Silence. (No surprises there either.)

The rest of the afternoon is quiet, thank fuck. He's pretty sure Vance would like to call him on the carpet if he could just figure out what to say.

A few hours later he's on his way out the door (last one in the bullpen) when his desk phone rings. He thinks about not answering it (he thinks about that a lot, in a lot of situations) but of course he does.

"Gibbs."

"Ah, Jethro. I'd hoped I'd find you still at your desk. Your work ethic is truly admirable, you know."

"What do you want?" He thinks of telling Kort he's lost this round, but he doesn't. He knows what sport they're playing now (thank you, Colonel Carter), and the stakes are too goddamned high. (Knowledge is a weapon, but only if you're the only one who knows you know -- Hetty said that, and he knows now why he's been thinking about her since all this started. It's the same game she taught him. Same stakes now as then: the end of everything if you lose.)

"To congratulate you." Kort sounds sincere. He always does.

"You called me up for that?"

"I like you, Jethro. I have your best interests at heart. I always have. There's just one more thing."

He's hanging up the phone -- he isn't interested in playing Kort's games on a good day, and this isn't one -- when Kort says something else.

"Mr. Philby sends his regards."

He stands holding the receiver until he hears the dial tone buzz.

#

All he's left with from the McConnell case is the knowledge there's a war going on he hasn't been
invited to. He'd leave for some place marginally saner, but they keep the Yards next door, and men and women have lied to him, but NCIS just fucks him up the ass without lube, so he guesses he's staying until Vance either puts a bullet in his head or a knife in his back.

Thursday's quiet, and so is Friday, and he figures done is done, but it isn't. Friday night he's down in his basement when he hears his front door open and close and a minute or so later he hears footsteps coming down the stairs.

It's Dr. Jackson. She's got her briefbag over her shoulder, but she's wearing khakis and chukka boots and a flannel shirt, looking relieved the masquerade is over. When she gets to the bottom of the steps she swings the bag around to her hip and opens it -- letting him see every move -- and pulls out a bottle. Bourbon. The good stuff.

"I figured I owed you a drink," she says.

He waves her over to the workbench and fiddles around for a couple of jars. She only lets him pour a splash into hers.

"I hate bourbon," she says conversationally. But she drinks it down, and he thinks of professional courtesy and professional paranoia and can't decide whether he wants an invite to her war or not.

"Beer?" he says.

"Scotch," she answers, fishing a Sportsman's Friend out of the briefbag.

He leans against the workbench and she goes over to sit on the steps. He raises his glass in a silent toast to two dead Marines, good men and loyal. She smiles a little and raises her flask.

After a while he goes back to work on the boat.

"Jack won't say how you know each other," she says maybe an hour later. He's planing the hull. The edge of the plane digs in. Fuck. He sets it down (bastard's sharp) and runs his hands over the raw wood to see how much of a mess he's made. Fixable. But it wouldn't have needed fixing if she'd just kept her fucking mouth shut.

(O'Neill'd have a thousand asinine ways to make it clear he wasn't going to go there while making the whole thing a joke. O'Neill always joked most about the important things.)

"Think I'm the guy to ask?"

"Of the two people with answers, you're the better bet."

He can think of a dozen things to say. Cruel and shitty and he can't remember whether it was Number Two or Number Three who said the only time he'd open his damned mouth was when he wanted to make somebody bleed. (It was close enough to the truth that it pissed him off for most of a year after he talked himself into a truly memorable settlement. If God hates spies, Satan loves lawyers.) He doesn't. It's not that he thinks he owes Dr. Jackson anything (it's a little tangled up about who did what to and for whom back there), and it's not (exactly) that he knows she's easy to hurt (although she is; and he won't think about Jenny; when girls too young for you start reminding you of dead girls, it's time to stop drinking or start).

"That why you came?" he asks.

"No. Not really."
There's no answer he can give her without *explaining* -- about Anya and Vanya and Irina and Moscow and Leningrad and Poland and Minsk -- so he doesn't. He goes over to the workbench and roots around in the drawer for some sanding mesh. Probably ought to just throw the whole thing out; hull's going to be shit for ever and ever, world without fucking end, amen. He finds the piece he wants, stops to pour himself a drink. It's that kind of night.

When the urge to set fire to the boat has passed, he goes back over to it and begins -- gently, delicately -- removing the mark he made.

The next time he looks up, Dr. Jackson's gone.

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