He stroked over the rough texture of the stitching for a moment. Where was the distinction? The opposite. Not chaos and evil, but order and virtue. What were the cardinal virtues again? Wisdom, fortitude, temperance and... Justice.

Notes

I have two co-authors who humor me when I want to write the same story twice; Another version of Still Waters.
Classical music was inspiring to work to, even in the most gruesome of jobs.

Or artistic.

Gil wasn't sure where to classify Paul Millander's work, because there was a certain skill and mastery of the craft even in masks and grotesque sculptures. It seemed fitting with the cooing of mourning doves in the rafters, the music from the somewhat dilapidated stereo that was off to the corner. There was a certain sense of thrift within the walls of the warehouse, and he noted that Paul was wearing almost the same clothes as he'd been wearing when they'd brought him in two months prior. Humble, yes, but well tended. He'd made a home out of a workshop and warehouse.

"Say, w-would you like a cup of coffee? I got instant." Polite, and eagerly offered -- there was some intangible reason why Gil took up the offer, rolled with it. He was tired, and the case was at a dead end again, their criminal too keen-minded to leave them much by way or real, solid evidence.

"Sure."

The smaller workshop had a few chairs, some work tables, high quality lamps and tools out in the open. There was an art sink and a hot plate. On the far side of the wall was another interior door, cracked open a little.

It was habit as much as anything that made Gil scan the room. It was surprisingly sterile and minimalist, and Gil was reminded a little of his own apartment. He had imagined the creative process to be more fluid rather than restrained; there was definitely something about Millander that pulled at him.

Someone somewhere had one of those fake arms, in connection to somewhere he had been. That was the logical evidence trail he had to follow. Not this tweak of instinct.

Paul seemed at ease, after all, while he picked up a steel kettle from the hot-plate to fill two mugs. Then he started to look for a spoon to measure and stir the instant coffee. There was no question that the location was what made Millander seem so much more together and calmer than he'd been when they'd brought him in for questioning months beforehand.

Gil couldn't help but think he would find things a lot easier if he had a workspace like that. No politics, no distractions; just the gift of time, concentration and the ability to see every thing through.

"I envy you, Mr. Millander," Gil noted, as his eyes drifted over the sketches that adorned the walls,"I do. You can work by yourself, no one around to bother you... you just do what you do. I'd love to have that kind of autonomy." There were times when the world was the last thing he wanted to see.

"It's... really all I know. I... started out doing ice-carvings, but the artwork never lasted." He had a quirk of a smile on his face when he stepped up to Gil with the hot, but not too-hot cup of coffee.

"I know what you mean." The art of a crime-scene faded fast, didn't it? "Thank you."

"Have a seat." The chair squeaked when Millander sat down roughly across from him. "How can I help you?"
Follow the evidence. The Gospel according to Gil Grissom -- he knew what Nick and Warrick said in the break room about his insistence on making that such an all consuming priority, but there was no other way that worked as well with least damaging consequences. Logic told him, he had to find where the model hands had gone so he could find a commonality between them and his own presence providing that fingerprint and from there to a person. Following the evidence -- an incontrovertible chain of progression. So why did he feel uneasy?

"Do you remember the uh, rubber hand mould you made from your own hand?" Gil asked intently, his mind now focused on the man and his response.

Millander's face was expressive, at ease despite the stopping and starting pace of his speech. All sorts of things drove a person to seeking solitude in their work, from disabilities to speech problems like Millander. It made you a recluse, yes, but not necessarily a murderer.

"Sure. How c-could I... forget it? I'm working on a, a prototype to replace it that doesn't have real prints."

Gil smiled a little. "After your experiences with being pulled in for questioning, I can understand why." He cleared his throat a little. "The last time we talked you told me you had sold several thousand units? I was hoping you could provide me with a list of your distributors."

"Oh." Millander's face fell a little, and he looked sideways for a moment, looking right -- notably not looking left, which meant imagination while the right was memory. "I-I'm just a wholesaler, Mr. Grissom. I... create. I take payment in c-cash, I make enough of a r-receipt that the IRS doesn't haul me in. I-I don't keep track."

Grissom watched him, feeling a twinge of disappointment. "Well that rules out my hope of doing a credit card search. Do you keep any sort of a list?"

He gave a helpless shrug. "I... I don't remember. I'm sorry, Mr. Grissom. I just... spook the children."

The wavering smile was sincere and seemed genuinely sympathetic. Then he started to shift out of his chair. "H-hold on a minute, and I'll check?"

Spook the children. Something clenched inside his gut at the words. His long buried intuitive instincts tried to get his attention even as his rational mind analyzed the data and found it innocuous and in character. No red flags, everything explicable and coherent and his mind was saying one thing and his intuition something else.

Rationality won out as it generally did. "Thank you, I appreciate it."

He looked at the sketches again as he fiddled with the sunglasses he had taken off and had yet to put in his pocket or on the table. Distorted looking women that was in spare line and all the more disturbing for the fact there was nothing overtly grotesque just surreally deformed. Not like the Good versus Evil model Millander had been working on when he came in, which looked like it had been modeled on Millander's own head. Although when he had walked in, the head had appeared totally normal and innocuous until Millander had showed him the other side he had been working on...

The hairs prickled on the back of his neck, with the wave of cool adrenalin fear that rippled through him. He'd felt this once before, in a life he'd tried to leave behind. He'd been here once before...

Hidden evil? It could've just been paranoia, and he knew that that had reared its head at him before in false circumstances. Millander's feet had re-treated while Gil had gazed over the sketches, and now they were coming back. "I h-have a short list, Mr. Grissom. M-maybe that will help you."
Okay, he could take the list and get the hell out of there. Just this once. Make an excuse, thank the man for his time, and try not to stink of fear that he could feel rolling off of him in palpable waves. There was courage and there was stupidity, and he aspired not to be a stupid man.

"At this point in time, Mr. Millander, anything should help," Gil commented, off the cuff as he turned around.

He almost missed the gun trained on him because Millander was smiling at him with a pure and almost startling degree of happiness in his expression. "Please, call me Paul."

His stutter had vanished along with any sense of normality in the situation. The gun was unwavering and pointed directly at his heart even as Millander's blue eyes captured his own gaze.

It was hard to keep his eyes from traveling to the gun, and then back to Paul's face, and then back to the gun. No sudden moves, and while he had his hands at his sides, he couldn't reach for his own gun. "All right, Paul. Why don't you put that down?"

"You know, I actually saw the moment when you became sure?" Paul said conversationally. "You fought it, but you still knew. You stiffened as if a mental bomb had exploded in your head. Please put your jacket on the chair, and ensure your phone is in the pocket." He jerked a gesture with the gun, taking the safety off with deliberate poise.

And there had been that moment, Gil couldn't deny it -- not to himself, even though he could open his mouth, form words to the contrary. He didn't, because any denial could bring about violence. He stood still for a moment, and then started to shrug out of his blue jacket while deliberately putting a planted thumb print over the inside of his sunglasses as he put them on the table. He'd always liked that jacket, and his phone was already in the pocket and maybe someone might notice the print and work it out. It took just one motion to drape his chair on the chair's back. "I wasn't sure."

"Oh, I know," Paul said still smiling. "You wanted to be wrong. You are a rare breed. Rarely wrong, but delighted to be proved wrong. I've had great hopes for you. You haven't let me down, Gil. You don't mind if I call you Gil, do you?"

It obviously wasn't going to stop Millander from doing whatever he was planning. Gil shrugged just a little. It didn't matter what he called him.

"There were two possible outcomes from our meeting today. I've known that a long time," Millander said watching him closely. "Only two. It's funny how things come down to opposites and polarity isn't it? How polar opposites can at the same time be very similar. I've lived that a long time and so have you Gil. Different ways but... yes..."

He looked satisfied

Satisfied, and Gil didn't know what to do with that as he stood by the chair, wondering why he'd been told to drape his coat there. The wondering didn't last long -- it was all about the semblance of normalcy. Whatever scene was being staged, it needed to start with things seeming very normal. His analytical mind put together a horde of facts and allowed him to shoot out random on-target guesses. "You're skipping ahead a year."

"Well, we have to make exceptions for special circumstances. Up the stairs, Gil." He gestured with the gun again, staying a reasonable distance away. Too far to jump and live at least, Grissom could see that. "Now."

Up the stairs. Up the stairs and towards the bathtub. Gil guessed that the other resolution to the visit
was that he walked away -- since the man seemed so set on discussing extremes, two sides of an 
issue. Life and death. That was certainly one way to simplify the way that any moment in time could 
turn. Gil inclined his head a little, and trying to breathe normally, turned towards the slightly open 
side door that he could only guess let into a stairwell.

He kept waiting for Millander to make a mistake as the shocks of adrenalin kept pounding through 
his bloodstream trying to get him ready for the slightest flaw, the minutest mistake and he would be there...

Millander didn't make any mistakes. Here was a man who had undoubtedly seen how people had 
been caught; a man who had meticulously manipulated the scenes of his crimes not just to conceal, 
but to make a poetry of evidence. He just didn't make the mistakes he was hoping to see and use.

Gil could hope that he would, but as he pulled open the door and stepped into a tiny hallway that 
aborted directly into stairs, he knew he wouldn't have that chance. The environment was too small, 
too controlled for him to pull something on Millander.

By the time he reached the upstairs, his neck was crawling. That Millander would fire if he had to 
was not in doubt. Was this how he had controlled his other victims? A strange pang hit him at the 
thought of his team finding him a bloated corpse in a bath tub and his last words recorded to echo in 
a mockery of all he believed about life.

"Stand there." Paul was watching him from a safe distance. "Near the bed. Remove your pants."

Remove his... Gil walked towards the bed, and started to take his pants off -- but slowly. 
Painstakingly. He unbuckled his belt, and started to wind it around his knuckles once he'd 
unthreaded it, careful and precise with the motion. "You don't have to do this, Paul. If you turn 
yourself in, if you cooperate..."

"Then perhaps I would see myself in my own courtroom," Paul smiled again. "Opposites and 
identities, Gil, layers and layers. Meet the second real me -- Judge Mason. I'm not interested in 
making deals. There is a difference between a compulsion and a mission."

The second real me. Gil looked at Paul, took in the faint shift in his facial expression. Hiding in plain 
sight, to be a judge-come-killer, and what did Millander have to lose by telling Gil who he was? 
Nothing, nothing, because dead men could only speak in evidence, and all the evidence that 
Millander would be leaving would be a faked suicide.

He wasn't going to think on the layers and layers, opposites and identities. Wasn't, didn't want to. 
"They'll give you the death penalty when they catch you," Gil noted while he set the belt down on 
the bed, and then unbuttoned the top button. Maybe he could let his eyes drift a bit, take the place in. 
Maybe there was an opportunity waiting.

"Of course," Millander replied unconcerned. "If they do. Of everyone, you've come closest. And the 
shirt when you're done strip teasing, Gil." His attention never wavered even as Gil's eyes wandered.

It seemed like an ordinary room only... things tugged at his attention. Piles of books he half 
recognized. A bottle of wine on the side chilling in ice. An incongruous picture that nearly made his 
heart stop in shock. The Wounded Man, half furled. What...

Gil's fingers faltered and he forgot to slow down and make time for himself for a moment, stepping 
out of his pants and leaving his boxers on before his fingers started to fumble with his shirt buttons.
"You have... interesting tastes."

"Well done, Gil. Even now observing. Not exactly a homage but..." Paul shrugged circling slightly. "The word will suffice."

Perhaps he could lunge at him as they moved to the bathroom

As it was, Gil was resisting the urge to turn when Paul moved behind him, resisted the urge to track him with eyes and motion. "A homage," Gil repeated, shrugging his shirt off before he realized that he'd missed the bottom button.

"It'll come back to you soon," Paul promised. He was behind him now maybe a couple of meters away, still and silent.

It had already come back to him, but... But. But it was stupid to try to hide in plain sight. Gil preferred it, preferred just to exist and be and live, and he hadn't had any problems for fifteen years. Fifteen years of peace and freedom from it, more quiet than most men knew what to do with. "It's..." Gil haphazardly folded his shirt, but didn't quite turn around yet. He could imagine that the gun was still aimed chest level, probably parallel to his spine. "It's come back to me."

"The past has a way of tormenting the present." That was said in a whisper into his left ear and he hadn't even heard the man move. He was just there.

"Time for a rest, Gil. Don't worry it'll soon be over. But I'm sure not as soon as you would like."

He jerked then. He had to, because the immediacy of it was always what spurred him into action. He'd never been good at preplanning violence for violence -- he never would have made a good politician, because if a country had wanted to invade his country, he wouldn't have been able to raise the army until it was crossing the line. It had been carefully ingrained in Gil, by himself, by his mother, by everyone he knew. Everything was all right until someone's hand hit his face. Simple as that.

Gil twisted, trying to duck at the same time, and he wouldn't have been surprised by the feeling of a gun coming down across his head like a cudgel if he'd had the coherency to think, when everything sharply turned red and then black in a shower of painsparks.

There was someone stroking over the old scar on his stomach. Soft touches from long fingers slithering from one type of tissue to another with a sense of fascination in every movement.

"I see you're awake, Gil."

His opened his eyes for a moment, and then let them slide closed. They felt heavy, and he wanted to lift a hand to rub at them, but the motion aborted itself. There was tightness around his wrists, no more than an inch or two of leeway -- nowhere near enough to rub at his eyes before he opened them fully.

Paul was naked, sitting on the edge of the bed, fingers petting feather-soft over the looping fish-hook of white skin that marred a natural tan. "Does it matter?"

"Not particularly. I suppose I could do what I have to do with you unresponsive, but I'm self-indulgent enough to want more than a corpse," Paul replied still trailing his hand over his abdomen and then up to brush at an exposed nipple. "Hmm. Under other circumstances..." The other man
shook his head with regret. “But we have to make sacrifices.”

The implication was already clear, but Gil kept his eyes on Paul's face. “No. You don’t have to make sacrifices or do this. Please don’t.” It wasn't begging, but a polite request.

"You're beautiful," Paul murmured looking at him. "In opposite lives, Gil, perhaps that coffee would have been as innocent as it seemed. Perhaps it would have led to more. I would have liked that. Perhaps and maybe are powerful things." He leaned down and kissed at Grissom's chest softly. “Perhaps in that other life, you trusted me enough to ask me to do this. Wanted it..."

"I don't play the 'what if' game," Gil murmured, mumbled, because he could hardly enunciate the words above Paul's own calm whisper. His head was starting to remind him with a throbbing ache how he'd been subdued in the first place, and there was a serial killer kissing up his chest. “You should have guessed that. You've... done enough research."

"A point to the CSI tied to the bed of a serial killer," Paul replied in a murmur. He moved lower, tasting all the time with his lips and tongue. “You could just... enjoy this. I'm almost certain I will. Only almost because I have a cherished ideal in my mind of what could have been. But then, they say all artists are romantics at heart."

And apparently all serial killers liked to think of themselves as artists. It was sad, but Gil suddenly yearned for Millander to have been... a lucky, slavering madman. Something, anyone, other than a man who'd researched Gil's dirty little secrets out of the wastebasket of history.

The feeling of a tongue tracing over his stomach muscles, over the padding he'd gained from too much takeout, made Gil want to shiver. It had been a very long time, but... But. “You already have your control. What does it matter if I enjoy it or not?"

"Because when you enjoy it, you think it was something you consented to, don't you, Gil?"

Millander was between his legs then, finding spots on the inside of his thigh and pressing in with fingers and then with lips, so close his fine hair was tickling over Grissom's cock.

Gil leaned his head back into the pillow, and closed his eyes tightly. It was impossible to fight an erection, and his mind was already spinning with thoughts, clouding any effort to calmly think of things that would kill it. There were little pieces of Hannibal in the room, enough to conjure up old thoughts, unresolved chunks of existence. It wasn't a situation that Gil could deal with.

There was no way to deal with it, but there was. There was, because he couldn't just stop. “Does this look like consent to you?"

"No. But that's only because I've gone to the trouble of making the control obvious," Millander said with a faint smile. “I never said what I was doing was right. I never pretended that. I'll even admit to some selfish enjoyment in what I'm going to do. But there's no reason there can't be a purpose, too. You never realized, did you? That he forced you as surely as I will."

That wasn't in any records, was it? No, it wasn't. The dance was, the mental tango that had left him unresponsive after everything had fallen apart, but not... Even the scars, the physical injuries. But not that. Not that. There were no records of dinners and operas and symphonies, no record of working through drinks turning to more, turning to something that he was sure he'd hidden from Molly.

Unless Molly had been there, too, in her own way, and could he blame her? They hadn't ever spoken of it, and that had been the first open, unspoken secret between them. “What're you talking about?
"You. Him. It's obvious, Gil. It's the connection that tethers the two of you together," Paul replied blowing a warm breath over his growing erection. "You're his territory, haven't you realized that? Didn't you notice the pattern? That when you were with someone, he re-emerged? Don't you think that was a little more than coincidence?"

"I'd be thinking very highly of myself if I thought that." Gil's voice quaked, and his dick twitched between his legs. He shouldn't have been so comfortable like that, but he'd played games like that, submission because it had turned his lover on. Face down in the sheets, crying, struggling, mewling sex when it was all he could do to breathe, breathe from one moment to the next, feeling it, dick or fingers or fist, until release was wet and slow and he was eased back into himself. But that had been a long time ago, before the nightmares and before the nights of no release ever, no sleep, no rest. No feeling it or anything because feeling could be a raw wound, pressing fingers into a bloody scrape.

"You should think highly of yourself," Paul chided gently. For a moment, it was hard to remember that he was in fact a serial killer. “You are... exceedingly attractive. Which admittedly makes the fact I'm going to rape you shortly a whole lot easier to bear."

He leaned in and tongued at Gil's cock teasingly for a long moment before engulfing it in his mouth. From one end of the comfort spectrum to another in seconds, and Gil didn't have time to react to that last sentence before there was a tongue on his dick, and then he was being deep throated. He wasn't supposed to move, he was supposed to fight it. His ankles were tied, he was spread-eagled, but he could jerk and twist and try with his little leeway to get free.

He tugged with his wrists, and then laid his hands down, balled into fists. He wasn't going to get to live the fantasy where he managed to heroically break a rope and beat off his captor one handed. He'd rip his wrists raw first, and possibly lose the chance for a more opportunistic moment.

It didn't seem to deter Millander in what he was doing. He carried on regardless. No quips or leers, just a rather bizarrely wistful attentive stimulus. He didn't surface until Gil's body had responded.

"There now," he murmured. "I guess you know what's coming next don't you, Gil? I suppose you ought to be able to tell yourself that it was definitely rape. So... I should oblige."

"Whatever... reason you have for doing this, you don't have to," Gil tried to reiterated. But he was the one lying spread-eagled, tied to the man's bed, and he was the one with an erection jutting up, hard and eager while the rest of him wasn't there with it. He'd been so close to coming that it wasn't funny, none of it was funny.

"There are no other paths open to me. This is the final choice," Paul replied cryptically. He knelt up, exposing for the first time some bandages around his own stomach and left leg. "I'm going to fuck you before we move on to more... traditional things, and maybe you'll even enjoy it. Who knows. I know I will."

Gil closed his eyes, and gave a slow, purposeful pull at the ropes that had been carefully tied around his wrists. It wasn't shoddy work -- two, three loops, sturdy and meant to do less damage to him than one loop might have. “Should I be happy for you?"

"What you feel is your business. Think, feel, live, die. It's all up to you, Gil."

He nudged against Grissom's entrance. “This will undoubtedly hurt. Without lubrication. Unless I'm really wrong about you, I don't expect you to be happy about that."

He didn't wait for a reply but just pushed in, hard and fast. There wasn't time to think about it, wasn't
time to struggle harder or panic. Paul was kneeling between his stretched out legs, and lifting his
hips, and leaning into him to use his body weight to force his way in. And he got in, dick right up
Gil's ass, making him choke and bite through the inside of his bottom lip. There was blood and a
faint distraction of pain to carry him through it, the words that Paul had said sticking in his mind like
a rock. *It's all up to you.*

All up to him. Was there a way to get out of there alive? Was it cooperation or resistance? And did
that even matter when breathing was stifled in a choked gasp Because Paul was pulling back out of
him.

"Shh... Shh, Gil... it's going to be all right, it'll be over soon," Millander said even as he snapped his
hips back in again and settled into a grueling rhythm.

There was nothing he could do about it. Tied too tightly, the trace of blood in his mouth the pain
there and the humiliation of needing to come growing with each movement.

It could have been worse. There could have been more of a parody of intimacy, for all that Millander
said he was going to and wanted to enjoy it, it could have been worse, paradoxically, and he'd think
about that. Later, when he wasn't burning from the inside out.

What wasn't normal was the apparent stamina. What wasn't normal was the way he pushed and
pushed and then jerked him off to the same movement but there was no spill of warmth inside of
him, only the blood that made it rape. Inescapably and painfully rape. He could see that read out to
an autopsy recorder along with the marks of ropes.

Al would have a field day with it, and ponder about condoms and what caused it, and run kits and
tests on him until they ran out of ways to collect the evidence. He could imagine Nicky picking rope
fibers out of his wrists, Because he was trying to fight it, trying to get it to stop, even though part of
him knew it would stop when he came.

A perverse part of him wanted to hold out and deny him that but that was easier said than done. It
was a myth that a man could not be raped if he came. Hit the right spot, pump hard enough and... He
could feel it there.

"Let go, Gil... you know you will. Do you deny yourself... for... a larger payoff? How... flattering."

Millander finally sounded like he was straining, breathing hard even though his cadence of
movement didn't change. Maybe he did find it flattering, but he managed to rub his hand the right
way, twist skin over swollen muscle and blood vessels and nerves just the right way, and the smack
smack smack of skin against his balls was still sounding when he spilled all over his own stomach
and Paul's hand.

"There now..." Millander slowed with a rather peculiar whole body shudder. "Mmm. Yes. Very
nice."

He pulled out abruptly, wiping himself clean of blood. “Not so bad. Well, not compared to being
fucked by your own gun. A lot of things are bearable in comparison.”

Gil sucked in a few shaky breaths, straining to open his eyes, watching Paul. His eyes were damp,
and there was a good chance that his nose was running or going to start running. “Metaphorical gun,
or... ?” Even metaphorical gun was something he'd seen in his days. He'd seen it in cases.

"Oh, no. Your own actual gun," Paul said leaning back lazily and picking the weapon up from the
side and lying the cold metal on his stomach. “Can you imagine it? Wondering if I might just... slip and pull the trigger with it in your ass? I'm sure you have cop friends who might play gay Russian roulette with you, Gil, if you wanted it... hmm?”

He wasn't supposed to start to shake. He was supposed to stay calm, detached, but supposed to was intangible, an assumption. What a gunshot wound to find him with. What a wound tract to have his co-workers tracing. "N-no..."

The barrel of the gun slid through the slick semen on his stomach and then Millander trailed it down to push just at little at his abused entrance. "Are you sure, Gil? Really? Would you bargain for it?"

Gil was shaking, and closed his eyes tightly at the feeling "I..." Would he? Could he even remember what the damn question was with the feeling of the cold, sharp-edged gun pressing into him? "P... please. I don't..."

Millander leaned forwards. “Kiss me on the neck like you mean it. Like I know you did for him.” The metal nudged against him again pushing deeper until he actually acquiesced and kissed and suck harder with the rather disturbing sensation of the safety being cocked back even as Millander pushed at him.

By the end of it, he was shaking and he couldn't stop. "Please...don't."

"Well it would disrupt what I have planned and... It is hard to play gay ass roulette with a pistol not a revolver..." Millander removed the metal barrel and lifted it, turned, showing the rapid discoloration of a 'love-bite' on his neck which seemed to amuse him. "Hmm, do you think anyone is going to come for you, Gil Grissom? Do you think they've even noticed you've gone? Is there someone out there who will spark with outrage at what I've done and what I'm going to do to you before the night is over?"

Probably not. He was one of them, sure, but he'd become just another case. They might reminisce when they cleaned out his office, but meeting his mother would be strange and odd for them when they didn't know, and she'd probably bury him back home.

Disjointed, stupid thoughts, but it was the best Gil could manage while he sucked in a few shaky breaths. Everything was starting to hurt, even with the endorphins. "Supposed to... show up for shift tonight." But he'd come to see Millander after work. His SUV was parked outside.

"Mm. I know." Millander sat up suddenly, tilting his head a little. "Well, well, a little earlier than expected but still..."

There was the sound of a car or truck turning on the gravel area outside.

"You really do have some naturally curious friends."

He sucked in a shaky breath, surprised by that. Who could it be? Someone else trying or thinking of talking to Millander. Gil pulled at his wrists, head turning to look towards the door on the other end of the room that opened into the stairs that opened into the... So close. "Surprised?"

"Not unexpected but I suppose it is convenient enough. I believe I can convince them to leave. And if not, I'll just kill them." It was the matter of fact tone in his voice that was the most chilling, and the fact he was naked except for the gun he was holding.

One more shaky breath, and Gil fixed his eyes on Paul. “Don’t...” Shoot them, because he could imagine Nick laying there dead at the doorstep, maybe dragged in and positioned among the horror props downstairs.
Paul smiled, leaned forward and kissed him on the forehead. "We'll see," he murmured as if he was promising some sort of treat.

With deliberate concentration, Paul pistol-whipped him across the face with a precise skill.

His head had already been throbbing, aching, and that sharp blow was enough to send Gil out of it. It was almost a blessing.

He didn't want to be awake if Millander shot one of his people.

Something was definitely up.

Gil had left the office without saying where he'd been going, but she knew he'd had a hunch. Gil with a hunch was like a dog with a bone -- neither were likely to let it go until they'd cracked right through it. Catherine just hoped that Gil didn't end up with a mouthful of splinters like he usually seemed to get.

So she'd followed her own hunch, and now the world was starting to assume twilight zone like proportions. Gil's Tahoe was parked in front of the warehouse, while she'd just assumed he'd gone home before putting in a full second shift. He'd looked tired, and if Gil actually took a breather once in a while... God. She wasn't going to stop him that was for sure.

So Gil was here. Correction, Gil's vehicle was here. She could practically hear his voice in his head giving her some lecturing words on assumptions and proof.

"Shut up, Gil..." she muttered to herself as she entered the warehouse door. "Mr. Millander? Mr. Millander! Criminalistics..."

"Coming!" The sound was from behind a door, and she could hear shoes coming down steps, a fast succession of clomps like the guy was tripping down the steps. It put her on edge, because she'd never met the guy -- he could be built like a line-backer, or look like Vincent Price. At least that would've fit the decorations.

There was a set of paint on a table and a half-finished head on a pottery wheel. Pretty grotesque stuff, a normal face and then this charred dripping face.

As long as that wasn't a self portrait, she could cope. "Take your time," she called back. It gave her chance to look around, whether for signs of Gil or on this case, she wasn't sure. Something was prickling at her about this place. It seemed so sterile and controlled for the artistic process. When Lindsay painted, it got everywhere no matter how tidy she tried to be. There were spots in the living room that would never recover.

Particularly that spot on the carpet where Lindsey had decided that cutting it out with scissors would be the best way to hide the paint spill from mommy.

"I-I just..." He was standing behind the door that was in some kind of workshop space, and that actually looked more like it had fallen prey to the artistic process. She barely had time to wander up towards the open doorway when he stepped out of the doorway and closed it behind him.

Paul Millander was, to put it briefly, a mess. His shirt was misbuttoned, and he was in the process of closing his belt as he walked towards her. "H-how can I, I help you?"
"CSI Catherine Willows. I believe you might have spoken to Mr. Grissom recently?" Catherine looked him over. "About your connection with the suicide-murder case we've been investigating?"

He was a shade taller than Gil was, but weedy; his hair was a little long, messy, and it just got worse when he ran a hand back through it in some attempt to straighten it. "Uh, uh, y-yes, h-he did. So, what c-can I do for you Mrs. W-willows?" He moved closer, and it was comfortably obvious that he was unarmed. Unless Catherine wanted to classify his face as some level of weaponry.

"Well I was wondering..." She half drawled the statement as she passed around. "If he had gotten around to asking you for bills of sale?"

"Uh... He did, b-but he ha... didn't, uh..." Paul cleared his throat, turning to keep facing Catherine. "He, uh... Wo-would you l-like to take t-them back to your office?"

Paul definitely had company; Catherine could smell it, sweat and sex, when she walked past him, and she could see it on the side of his neck, a suck mark on his neck. There were two coffee cups on a table, a pair of sunglasses, and a jacket over the back of one of the rickety looking chairs.

"That would be very useful, Mr. Millander," Catherine replied. She could rib Grissom about that later. "I'm sorry, have I interrupted you?"

Hickey on the side of the neck. Someone gave that to him. Convivial looking coffee situation. Real cozy. Really fucking creepy, but. Millander gave a somewhat sheepish smile. "Y-yes, but, uh... n-nothing I can't go back to wh-when you're done. I, I'll go get them." He gestured out of the area and back out into the warehouse.

"I'll just wait here, shall I?" There was the possibility it wasn't Gil's jacket, and it wasn't his sunglasses. She wasn't sure where she should be appalled or applaud at the thought of him getting laid. Especially to Millander. Totally unprofessional, but the guy gave her the creeps and she had vast experience of creeps.

"Sure." He gave her an easy smile, and walked back into his warehouse, with no qualms about leaving her alone. It wasn't like there was anything for him to fear from her, was there? She wasn't going to mug him for art supplies or run off with one of those freaky hands.

So, that gave her time to check the place out a little.

The moment he was out of the room she approached the chair and tweaked at the material. There was his ID...

"Gil, you old dog..." Her eyes were wide. She was seriously going to have a talk with him about being able to spot a creep. Millander had a weird vibe. She was used to men looking her over even if they were gay, and he hadn't done that at all. Coffee on the table, hardly touched, and... the acid test as she hastily sent Grissom a text and the jacket pocket trilled an alert.

Assumption proved. And that made her feel vaguely uncomfortable.

She was really going to have a talk with Gil. Sure, he'd struck out with Jackie in a horrifically bad way because she'd gone on and on about the lameness.

And... thinking about it, Gil had pretty bad luck and he'd had it as long as she'd been in the lab. Sure, he went both ways. She'd tripped over that fact when she'd stopped by his apartment and had found
a copy of QVegas under a piece of newspaper. If the best Gil could do by going both ways was someone like Paul Millander... Yeah. She needed to talk to him about it. But apparently not just then.

There were some things that she didn't need to see and a potentially naked Gil Grissom was one of them.

And he was seriously going to have to clean his sunglasses. That was a good sized thumb print in the middle and that would be a pain in the ass to get off. Who the hell picked up their glasses by the lens? She looked over to the door walking closer out devilry. She always did have a tendency to push things.

Worst case, she could blame curiosity or boredom. Lie on the fly. The door opened easily under her hand on the doorknob. There wasn't even a creak to warn Paul that she'd opened it. A staircase, with another door up top. If she went up those stairs, and opened that door, she was probably going to find a naked, possibly sleeping Gil. It was almost five, after all.

Hell, she was going to go home once she was done there and catch a few z's before she had to go back in at ten.

"M-mrs. Willows?"

She turned with a bright smile. "Ah you found the documents? Great."

"Y-y-yes." He offered them to her, posture casual, and it was like he finally realized she was there at all. Paul glanced her over, just briefly, and asked, "Is, is there anything I c-can do to help?"

She took the box and smiled back. "Just say hi to Grissom for me," she said as she lifted it up. "We'll contact you if we need any more information."

Grissom? Definite screwed up taste in men. The guy had that look that would have had her calling for interference back in her good old bad old days. But so far there was no law against having sex with a creep, otherwise Lindsay would never have been born.

But Eddie wouldn't have had the humility to flush a little red the way Paul did. He gave a bobbing nod, and moved to sort of politely escort her off the premises. "I, uh... I'll make sure h-he doesn't mu-miss his shift. C... C-could you, uh... k-keep this, uh... discreet? Gil, uh... l-likes his pr-privacy."

Catherine smirked a little. "Sure. Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Millander... I appreciate it."

"Y-you're welcome." He smiled again, and hovered back a little while he took her back towards the doors. Millander had to know that he smelled like sex, and that was a pretty good reason to hang back.

She turned and walked out to her car. She'd take this back into the office and maybe just lance through a few things. Maybe this would be the break they needed.

If they could just pin down the guy who was doing the killings, they could all take a little breather. Spend some time with Lindsey, maybe catch up on her reading.

The box could be a start.

The right side of his face was at once numb and aching. He wasn't sure how that worked exactly but it felt stiff and his right eye was refusing to want to open.
There was silence in the small bedroom and he was still here.

He was still there, still alive. Breathing, even if his eye wouldn't open, even if his jaw ached badly. Breathing was good, because as long as someone was breathing, as long as Gil was breathing, he'd be all right. He could still escape somehow, and that was the first thing Gil did, pulling at the ropes binding his ankles.

Still tight. A slightly delirious part of him had to appreciate how thorough Millander was and...

God, what had happened? Who had come and did they just leave or did Millander...

He pulled harder, feeling a surge of fear and adrenalin induced strength.

If Millander had killed any of them, he, he was going to put a stop to Millander, he'd have to. He'd have to because he'd been so fucking stupid as to walk into a trap when he knew, when his instinct had told him that yes, Paul Millander had taken the opportunity to lift his thumbprint. He'd been stupid enough to get himself into that position, and that was fine.

Gil could handle that, but not the thought that he'd gotten one of his team into that trouble.

There was a faint sound of movement and he turned towards it as Millander entered the room. "Sleeping beauty awakes," he said. "You've overslept. We'll have to be swift with our time. But that's fine... everything is in place." He lifted a linoleum knife that had replaced the gun. "I'll have long enough."

It took a minute for Gil's conscious self to jump to the suggestion that his subconscious self had. "No..." No, because he couldn't run, couldn't struggle, and it was a lie when he was told that it wouldn't hurt, it would just feel like going to sleep. He pulled tight at the ties, starting to twist despite that it rubbed his skin raw, despite that it already hurt. "I, I... don't want to die."

"No. I don't suppose you do. But if it were you or one of your friends what would you choose?" Paul asked as he came closer. Behind him there was a small table set up, the wine part poured, a salad on a plate and something that looked like a molded chocolate desert on a dish beside it. The knife edge gleamed. "I have to time this right..."

He glanced at his watch.

And Gil watched the gesture, watched Paul glance at his watch, before he crushed his own eyes closed. Eye. The right one wasn't opening, and he hoped it was because of the swelling. Hoped that he'd get the chance to see if it was swelling or not. "Wh... why?"

"Because it's what I have to do. And I'm a sentimentalist." Paul approached him. "For the gift I hope to make of all this. I promise you, Gil, it will be worth it."

"What are you..." Gil had to try to look again, had to try to muster up the strength to keep talking. "Are you going to gain to... by mimicking him? I al, already have the scar..."

"His mark, his territory. A touch of trespass. Maybe you'll live to figure it out..." Millander climbed onto the bed with him. "Things can be improved upon."

He had to think. Had to think, Because Millander was playing far ahead of him, and Paul knew what his goal was where Gil didn't, hadn't had time to start to look at the evidence and pull at it. "You're going to... improve on what he tried to do?"
Millander just smiled and lifted the blade shaking his head. "You should listen to your instincts more often. Seconds it took you to put it together that it was me and you fought it. That is... a peculiar genius you have and yet you deny it. You should've realized he did this to you because you were too good at what you did." He glanced at his watch again. "Ah... and if I'm right about her, she should be realizing any moment now. Ten minutes of pain, Gil. Be brave."

Be brave. Cautionary suggestions and goading, from a man who'd, who'd already...

There was a whirl of thoughts in the back of his head, and it was already starting to shape into something vague, faint, but it was peering up at Paul while he knelt on the edge of the mattress that finally made Gil's mind click.

"You don't have an adam's apple."

"Congratulations," Millander paused. "A piece of the puzzle but... I'm sorry, Gil, but I really should get on with it." He pressed the knife to skin and seemed to contemplate a moment.

The knife was pressing just on the edge of his collarbone, tipping a little, rocking like it was a teeter-totter. Skin was thinner there, and the pressure of knife threatening to cut made Gil clench his jaw. Be brave. He could be 'brave', because he had to make it make sense, had to work out why a man who was a judge, who wasn't a man, who wasn't a, no, who was a serial killer, would be kneeling there, doing that to him.

Pretending to be Hannibal.

The knife bit in slicing through skin, biting deep as Millander wielded it as if he was carving a sculpture. Graceful lines of agony swooped over his chest, flaring in broad stylistic lines as Millander held him still with his legs and murmured encouraging words in response to the noises of pain he couldn't help but make.

Couldn't help it, choking and strangling noises as he fought against Millander as best as he could, trying to jerk his legs until a knee pressed hard against his crotch, grinding down hard against his dick. Tears stung in his eyes, and Gil's muscles went tight, but he didn't jerk around as long as that knee stayed there. Couldn't, couldn't hardly think, because Millander was going to flay him alive.

"Shh... shush... It's looking just... fine, Gil. Just fine..." Millander said in an even tone as the knife moved with artistic precision and the reek of blood was overwhelming. "Be still. Still or I will take one of your balls and make you eat it."

And while he wanted to believe that it was just an idle threat, Gil couldn't. If he'd had a revolver, there was a chance that Millander would have tried it, pulled the trigger after putting one bullet in the chamber, just to see what happened. He couldn't trust anything; only that maybe obedience would get him through it. Gil bit his bottom lip again, struggling not to make more noise. Fighting not to look at the bowed head while Millander bent over his cutting.

There was a lot of blood and he didn't take it as a good sign when things started to become detached and almost numb. He was losing too much blood and Millander was still cutting. Some intricate design, shading done in fine delicate slices, broad strong lines in deeper cuts. And then a deep gouging and Millander held up a piece of flesh and examined it thoughtfully. “Big enough, I believe.”

Gil was going to throw up. Everything was starting to spin, swirl, cut apart and slide off to the sides, and he felt as if he were somehow sinking back from the cold, breathing fast and shallow despite the thick blood-iron smell that stuck in his nose. "Hnn..."
Rather strange it was only then that Millander put on the gloves waiting at the side, wiping off the knife with them, and smoothing away the blood for a moment before nodding, satisfied. “That’s enough.”

He leaned over and kissed Gil again. “Surprise me. Try and survive this, Gil. I didn't really want to hurt you. I respect you too much for that.”

With that he got up, placed the lump of flesh artistically on the waiting plate, took off the gloves and did one last look around. He picked up a cell phone from the side and looked at it.” Three missed calls. I should think they'll be here soon.”

Gil could barely keep his left eye open to take that in, the motions. He was... setting Lecter up for the crime, to the untrained eye, but it wasn't his style. It only seemed like that, and it wasn't Millander's style. The picture painted... Gil couldn't look to see what had been carved onto his chest. He laid his head back, and concentrated on breathing. "'s good. 'll catch you."

"They won't." Millander said. “If you survive, maybe you will. Goodbye, Gil. Breathe sparingly and hope your friends remain curious. It will be that which saves you.” And with that he headed towards the window rather than the door, and rather startlingly exited through it, looking back over his shoulder once.

And then he was gone.

Gil sagged against the mattress. Almost there. He had to keep thinking that they were almost there. He had to, to think and regroup and even though he was graying out, Gil managed one desperate, probably useless, cry for help.

It was all too easy to get dragged back into what was going on at the office, to leaf through the box and somehow not go home. Catherine found herself sitting at Grissom's desk fighting a growing sense of unease. It wasn't like him. Gil didn't do that, not in the middle of the case. Hell, if you listened to Nicky or Warrick, he never did it.

It made her jumpy as if she was missing something and she was frowning as she stepped into the break room for a coffee.

If she felt like she was missing something, she probably was. So she tried to avoid talking with the swing shifters who were getting coffee just then, and started to replay through her head what had happened. Gil had definitely been there, and Millander had smelled like sex. That... wasn't much evidence, but she’d drawn a pretty simple conclusion from it. After all, the pock-faced man had had a hicky on the side of his neck.

She sipped the coffee. Coffee, with none of it drunk on the table. Sunglasses on the table. But Gil wouldn't have worn the sunglasses in the warehouse, the light was dim. He would have put them in his jacket pocket, he always did. So why were they on the table? With a thumbprint in the lens. People didn't pick up sunglasses with their thumb over the lens. Someone would have to plant a thumbprint like that deliberately...

....a planted thumbprint.

She jolted up so rapidly she split some of the coffee on her sleeve but ignored it.
"Shit!" She was out of the room half running to her car, and dialing Brass even as she moved with speed. She didn't even stop to think of evidence, and Brass she knew would take a risk based on less. "Pick up, Brass... come on..."

One ring, two rings. He was probably asleep, but he was a cop and he could move fast. If she said Gil was in trouble, he'd be there in a second. He'd probably get there before she could.

~Brass. This'd better be good.~ He sounded groggy.

"Jim, it's Catherine..." She barged past one of the early shift techs. "I think... I think the suicide-murder killer is Millander and I think he's got Gil." No point beating around the bush. "I'm on my way... I'm a damn idiot. I was there and it was a set up I'm sure...

She could hear him getting up, and a muffled hiss when he hit something. ~Son of a bitch. That warehouse, right? I'll head out there. Hang up on me and call 911. Let's just hope we won't need a coroner.~

"Watch yourself if you get there first..." Catherine said fumbling with her keys and practically hurling herself into her car as she hung up. She knew she'd never forgive herself if they did need a coroner. Dammit, how long had it been?

She dialed 911, neglecting the fact that she had no real evidence for any of this, but the instinct strong enough that she was willing to risk it being a hoax. Fortunately when she identified herself as a CSI, the operator didn't argue and dispatched the units she requested.

"Dammit, Gil... if you've managed to get killed..."

If he was dead in a bath tub, she'd never be able to yell at him for being so stupid as to go talk to a suspect without an officer present. God. He had to be all right. He just... had to be all right. Held hostage, maybe, but not actually hurt.

Gil just wasn't supposed to end up like Holly.

He knew better. Sometimes she thought Gil knew better than God and then he'd pull something as idiotic as this.

And maybe he'd been upstairs hoping she'd been smart enough, clever enough to realize and help him and she'd just walked away planning off-color jokes to tease him with at the start of shift.

Or he'd been up there, already dead.

The speed limits lay shattered behind her as she gunned the acceleration.

Thinking like that, the evidence she'd been given seemed... sick. That hickey had gotten there somehow. Maybe it had started consensually and turned into a trap. She hadn't seen Gil's gun; he wouldn't take off his jacket and his phone and his glasses, without taking that off, too.

God, she just wasn't going to be able to get there soon enough. Maybe she was hours too late. Maybe Millander had taken so long to come downstairs because he'd changed out of bloody clothes.

She shivered. Grissom never had his phone out of reach. They joked he took it to bed with him.

Some joke. And it was always muted or silent. It didn't play twee little ringtones and sounds when they phoned or connected.
Would Brass get there first?

So the phone and the planted thumbprint, clean and easy to spot, had been cries for help, as best as Grissom could manage them. Maybe Millander had gotten his gun off of him and escorted him up those steps.

It still didn't explain the smell of semen.

Maybe Millander jacked off on him or... something. She would shoot and she would kill if she had to. She almost wanted to...

Her phone started ringing and she snatched it up, managing not to drive off the road. “Catherine Willows?”

~I t-think Gil's going to need a ride to work tonight.~ Paul Millander's voice slid into her ear. ~You should come and g-get him.~

"You son of a bitch! What have you done to him?" Catherine's temper exploded immediately. So much for playing it cool.

God. She was going to lose her temper while on the phone with a serial killer. She couldn't hear a ware-house style echo to his voice, so either the room he was in was contained, or he wasn't there at all anymore.

~I didn't do anything. I brought some friends over. People who wanted to... meet him.~

"Oh yeah? Who?" She challenged, running a light in her hurry.

~You'll figure it out. We had fun. But Gil's a, a mess right now. He just, just wouldn't stop bleeding, so we left him his gun.~

"You... you fucking bastard!" Catherine snapped back immediately. “We’ll get you for this, Millander, and you better hope that it's someone else apart from us who gets to you first, because I swear... I swear I'd sit at your meeting with a lethal injection with a smile on my face!"

~I can't be held responsible for a suicide.~ And then he hung up.

Oh, god. Oh, god.

No dammit, no. She was not going to find Gil in a bathtub with a tape of his voice reading a script of his last words.

She covered the last of the distance to the warehouse in record time. No sign of paramedics, no sign of back up. Like that was going to stop her. She was out, gun in hand and running towards the building before anything like common sense had time to kick in.

There was Gil's Tahoe, parked where she'd left it, but no sign of Millander's vehicle. In fact, she hadn't ever seen one. Maybe he'd been working with someone the whole time.

She heard Brass drive up just when she opened the warehouse door with her knee -- it wasn't even closed, let alone locked. Jim flashed his lights and left them running while he squealed to a stop. “Catherine!"

She had her gun out and peering into the space. She wasn't going to slow down but natural process
slowed her enough for Brass to catch up as she crept forward.

"Son-of-bitch phoned me. Two minutes ago tops..."

His own gun was out by the time he reached her, and he moved to slip past her. “Jesus. Stay behind me, we'll move fast. Just direct me where to go.”

"Work room off to the side, door and stairs leading upstairs,” she hissed. “He... he said he couldn’t be blamed for a suicide..."

She hated the fact that her voice nearly cracked on that, even as she moved behind him.

Jim was quiet and tense as he stayed ahead of her. He'd been a good supervisor for all of them, but he made a better cop. There was something about the way he moved, flashlight crossed over his gun, sweeping the room with both at the same time while he stepped firmly forwards. Maybe it just came from having done it for so long. “Workroom clear..."

"There," Catherine gestured to the door. "Dammit, I was going to look up the stairs and..."

The thought that Millander could have easily have overpowered her as well hadn't even crossed her mind.

"And then I'd be looking for you, too?" Jim reached for the doorknob with a handkerchief, and pulled it open quickly. A quick shine of the light proved that it was clear, so he started up the stairs in a run to the next door.

Catherine could hear sirens, and apparently so could Jim. “Go meet them. Show your badge, get them moving."

"I'll come running if you start shooting," Catherine agreed a little reluctantly as she paused and jogged back to the front door, to hurry them in, regardless of what Brass would find.

She could hear him kicking down the door at the top of the steps before she left the building, flashing her badge at the paramedics.

A youngish man, blond and tall, started to walk towards her as he got out of the back. “We’ve got a member of the PD down in there?"

"CSI." Catherine said. “Captain Brass is locating him. We had a tip off." The fact that she'd called for them before she'd had the tip off was a detail she wasn't going to talk about. “I’ll take you through... Brass will give us an all clear." She hoped.

"I'll get a stretcher." He jerked his head to the driver, and turned away to get what they’d need. At least, unless Gil was a corpse.

"Willows! We need to get him to a hospital FAST!” Jim was leaning out of an opened window that was up near the roof of the warehouse. “It’s clear!” And then he was gone back to the inside.

Catherine was left to shout instructions before she ran ahead of the paramedic team, running up the stairs and opening the door to a scene just a touch shy of her worst imaginings. The room reeked of blood, the bright and dark of a bleed out in progress immediately catching her eye.

"Jesus... Jim?" Her eyes were wide as she looked from the blood clothed body on the bed. "Griss...."
Jim had a pocket knife out, and was cutting ropes that seemed to be holding Gil's ankles. There weren't ropes around his wrists, but they were bloody. In the bouncing light of Jim's flashlight tucked under his armpit, she could more blood.

"He's out cold, but he still has a pulse..."

Catherine moved in closer, mesmerized. "We need to stop him bleeding," she said in a voice that seemed distant. "I... he needs blood. That's too much blood, Jim. Where are the paramedics?"

"Coming up!" That was the blond paramedic. He struck Catherine as being take-charge, and that was good. They needed someone to take charge, needed someone to get Gil oxygen, because every breath he took was shallow and it made Catherine ache.

Someone was going to have to process him. The room smelled like blood and sex, and in the bouncing flashlight, she could only see so much. There was a table set, like it was waiting for someone, but she couldn't yet guess who. Didn't know where to start, because the room was small with all three of them there just then, Jim leaning over the ropes, hacking at them with his pocket knife. "Jesus fucking... Catherine, get pictures of these, you've got to -- he'd want to see what the knots looked like."

Grissom would never forgive her if she failed at her job. Their job, when it was so important to catch him. The man hadn't stuttered like Millander. Hadn't sounded that much like him. Perhaps... Perhaps he wasn't, she didn't know but she was reaching for her camera and snapping pictures on autopilot before the paramedics got there and Jim had finished cutting and...

Was then horrified that she was doing that when Gil was bleeding to death in front of her. His torso was a mass of blood and cut swollen tissue. The bedclothes around him were saturated with dark thick crimson and there was very little that could turn her stomach but there was something about the impact to emotions that make her swallow back bile.

She wouldn't have seen it without the lightning bright illuminations of the flashbulb. Her camera slipped a little in her hands, while Jim checked Gil's pulse again, and she'd barely wrapped her fingers around it again before the paramedics stomped into the room. Jim had somehow moved again, and he reached out to pull her back.

"Catherine. We'll wait outside. We... can't work this case."

"Someone has to," Catherine replied still staring almost blindly. "We can't... we can't let Dayshift have this. We can't. Not Ecklie."

The mask was going on, and an IV of some description. Fluids. Pressure bandages being put on hastily. Flickers of red and white.

They worked fast, right on the crime scene. And while she usually would have felt a twinge at lost evidence, contamination... Gil needed to live. Victims needed to live, and there was so much more to every case than just the evidence. "Nicky. Warrick. Sidle." The hand on her arm shifted, slid over her shoulders. "We'll go with the paramedics. Or you can. Whatever. C'mon."

It was logical. They needed to get outside before the paramedics crew, needed time to make sure that they didn't ruin any evidence by accident. Jim's voice was thick with something, too-calm.

"I can't let Sara in here." Catherine realized she had spoken aloud when Jim looked at her. The panic and worry was a knot inside of her, twisting tighter. "Nicky and Warrick. I need to... be there. Gil
needs someone there. I left him alone, Jim. I left him here. I should've known. I should have... I..."

She had been downstairs and this had been happening. She wasn't sure she could forgive herself. She'd been thinking about Gil's bad taste in men and she'd been thinking that she needed to talk to him about it, and she'd left him. Blood and semen were hallmarks of rape and violence. That was what she'd left Gil to, and even after everything he'd kept a tight lip about with Eddie, it... Nothing was worth that. No silence was worth that happening to someone, someone who was a friend.

"It's okay." Jim was pulling her forwards, and the paramedics were moving Gil onto the stretcher. They needed to get out of the way, downstairs and forwards. “Go on with them to the hospital, Catherine. I'll stay here and call everyone in."

She nodded. She had to go. Emergency contact, honorary next of kin Grissom said when she had forced him to fill in one of those interminable forms.

"Thanks, Jim. If we can get them in, then it's our case. I can't bear... not Conrad looking at this," she exhaled, moving to follow them. "I'll call, okay? As soon as I know anything. Tell them that." She took as much comfort from patting the homicide detective as she gave and turned to leave.

He had to make it. Otherwise she would never forgive him. And never forgive herself.

How, how stupid could he be to go after a suspect like that? And how stupid was she not to understand the pieces?

There weren't words for it, but Catherine walked down the stairs despite it, walked down the stairs because she could hear the paramedics shadowing her, could hear them working a gurney down the narrow stairs a little slower than she was walking.

She just wanted them to hurry and not to let Gil's life bleed away. Gil had been family, friend and more than all of that to her. And when he needed her, she'd failed to be good enough.

Right now she just wanted him to survive so he could shout at her. She'd welcome that rather than the silence of the alternative.

The smell of Grissom's blood in the room lingered long after Catherine and the paramedics had left with Gil. Brass stood a moment in the room just trying to fight down the rage. He had a mask and a temper and right now the mask was slipping.

This was Gil. This had happened to Gil and he wondered if it would've made a difference if he hadn't been moved to Homicide. If he had still been the boss and hadn't screwed up.

Now he could say in his head he wouldn't have let Gil go off alone. He wouldn't have walked away. Somehow he would have known.

The image of Gil there, his closest friend, wouldn't go away. It lingered just as the smell of blood did, brighter and more vivid when he closed his eyes.

There wasn't anything for him to do but wait there, or wait outside for the CSIs. He wasn't sure if it was the smell of the faint hints of what had happened, but he felt sick, unsettled. Gil could've been in the bathtub of the place, shot, in a sleeping bag for less muss and fuss, a window open so the stench alerted the neighbors. He could've been the textbook suicide that was really a homicide, just another body on the table in the morgue. Cut open, Y-stitched closed again, ready for a grave.

Jim had to admit to himself that Gil could still end up that way. His pulse had been unsteady, weak,
and he just hadn't said as much to Catherine.

She'd never take it. And he could hope a little longer and make sure this was done right. He needed his team, Gil's team, in here. There were too many strange elements, ritualistic subtleties and the best person to interpret it was the one headed for the ER. Gil could never see it, but Jim'd watched it from the outside for too many years. Watched Gil enter a scene and seem just to see or know what happened even as he was meticulously chasing down evidence.

Now they had to do it without him and he didn't want that to be the case. The thought of Gil not being there...

Where the hell were they?

Probably god-damned lost. Stupid worthless piece of shit GPS computers didn't even work half the time, never mind giving them right directions. Jim moved out of the room, walking with the guidance of his flashlight, heading to start down the stairs. Maybe he needed to get outside again.

He walked away, stopping a moment. He wanted to be there with Gil.

"You better damn well make it, Gil," he muttered under his breath. "Fuck."

He had a bad feeling about this. Catherine hadn't been sure it was Millander so maybe they shouldn't assume it.

Gil would tell him never to assume anything, even when he was technically his boss. He liked that. He liked the fact Gil knew enough to do what was right.

He liked that Gil never seemed to be much bothered by his boss. They got along well, and Gil had been there, been the field officer there in the lab, when Jim had arrived. The previous shift supervisor had offed himself, jumped off of a hotel roof.

Gil had still managed to find a little black humor in it, and hey. Getting the job in Vegas had gotten Jim away from Jersey. Having a competent right hand man already in place was pretty comfortable.

Discovering over time that he was a good friend as well had been a bonus that had made things more than just bearable. It had allowed him to make Vegas a home rather than an exile. Both of them too into their jobs, both of them good at what they did. The lab had steadily climbed in reputation and success rates since the pair of them were there.

They'd had close calls, bad cases, living with the sort of intense awareness of life and death that made connections between people that couldn't be denied and sometimes that resulted in arguments and sometimes in nights where they could make each other laugh and then... nights that were drunken attempts to blot out thought leading to something else entirely.

Not one of their finest moments. Something he felt obscurely guilty about because he never knew exactly what Gil had thought, and it hit him that he might never know. He might be standing on his friend's murder scene.

And that would be that. He'd never know and he'd never talk to Gil again, probably.

It was enough to make a guy want to take up smoking again. Jim stepped out into the cold air of a settling night, and didn't have much more time to ruminate, because he could hear cars driving up. The cavalry had arrived.
The mask was there, in place. Habit of over a decade came to his rescue even though that rage inside burned at him. It had only been two months, and though he was making his mark in Homicide and this wasn't technically a homicide as yet, there would be only one case in Vegas tonight.

Nick and Warrick were the first to park up and get out of the truck. Then Sara. Catherine was right, there was no way Sara should process the upper room. He wasn't sure how Nick and Warrick would handle it either, but as he spent a great deal of time ribbing Gil over Sara...

Had spent.

He didn't need to waffle between past and present tense, but if Gil survived, he'd never joke him about suspicious connections to hot female CSIs ever again. As long as Gil was alive it didn't matter. Wasn't like he had a claim on the guy, and hey. Sidle was hot.

Sidle was heading towards him.

"Hey, Brass. What's, uh..." He'd been vague when he'd called them in. Wanted to only have to explain it once, with all three of them there to hear it. Nicky looked nervous, though.

"Sounded urgent," Warrick said studying him.

Brass knew they'd find no answers here.

Sara put her kit down. "A DB?" she asked assuming as such from his presence. It was a logical assumption and one he hoped was very wrong.

"No. I said I'd call you in. It's..." He thought he'd known how to put it, but seeing them all there looking at him expectantly threw him. "It's Grissom. Grissom was attacked. We assume that he came here to follow a lead about Millander and he was attacked. The perp called Catherine not long ago and she called me. We were first on scene. She's with him at the hospital."

"Oh, shit..." Warrick, frowning tightly, looking up at the large door behind Jim. Yeah, 'oh shit' summed it up.

"Grissom," Sara repeated, looking vague and just a little sick. And he hadn't even walked them inside to the scene. "This... this was the suicide-killer, wasn't it? It was the guy whose fingerprints were on the fake hand?"

Nicky looked like he had body punched him, momentarily speechless.

Jim nodded slowly. "We're not sure if it was him. Catherine said the voice didn't sound the same, no stutter." Best not to give them time to think. "Look, I'll have to back out soon, but this is not something for day shift. We get the jump on this, we get to keep it. Sara, I want you to process downstairs and Gil's Denali. Warrick, Nick do the stairs and bedroom. Do not miss anything."

"We won't," Nick said, clearing his voice.

"I mean it, Nick. This is no ordinary crime scene, and not just because it's Gil."

Warrick quirked an eyebrow at him, but they'd figure that out once they went upstairs and looked at the scene. Warrick would find it, even if it was just a god-damned toenail that was the give away, fucked up gambling problem or not. There was a reason why Grissom liked the guy as a CSI so much. "So, it's cleared? We just go on up?"
"I cleared it," Jim replied seeing the hint of rebellion in Sara's face. She was sharp and took offence at being put in the minors.

"They might need help in the rooms. I can..."

"I said downstairs for a reason, Sidle," he said sharply. It was strange that they just obeyed him. "There’s evidence there was time spent down there. He might have been meticulous upstairs but maybe he missed something there, okay?" He softened the call. "Look, get in there, get started before the detectives get here. Catherine is going to let us know how Gil's doing at the hospital. I'll be making statements, but this is your only case tonight. He wasn't that far ahead of us. We could get him."

They needed to get him. If just because he was escalating, shifting from straight murder to torture and... rape or whatever the hell he'd done. Jim had smelled sweat and semen, and that implied something pretty obvious. Either the freak didn't change his bed, or he'd tried to do more than just exterior damage to Gil. It wasn't just because it was one of their own.

Even if, Jim had to admit to himself, it really was.

"Okay." Nick set his jaw forwards a little, and looked at the other CSI that he usually competed against. "C'mon, man. Let's start with the stairs."

Jim watched them go inside and exhaled into the cool of the night. He'd give them ten or fifteen minutes to get settled in and then call Atwater. The Sheriff was getting comfortable with the fact that sidelining him after Holly had been a good move as Brass knew he had already made his mark on homicide even in those two short months. Done right, he would be able to give night shift the case, blurring the black and white into grey. Besides, he had a suspicion, a niggling suspicion this was going to go higher.

Anyway, it wasn't like the dayshift wasn't at home sleeping. Swing shift was thin and pretty fucking unremarkable, so Atwater would probably prefer night shift on it. As long as Catherine didn't start out working the case... Jim could probably pawn the case off to Vega if he had to. There were good detectives he could trust to work with night shift if Atwater brought up any problems with him working it.

And he'd take leave if Gil was going to make it. Be there. Why the hell not? He couldn't remember the last leave he had taken. He had an in-tray full of memos from personnel to that effect. If... when he took the time, he seriously wondered if some of the secretaries would retire from the pool going about when he would take vacation time. Otherwise he would be aimless and directionless and distracted and he could do that just as easily and with more purpose by Gil's bedside if they saved him than he could anywhere else.

He wanted to show Gil he was wrong when he thought he didn't matter to people for more than what he could do. For his skills. That he was important to them because he was him. At least that was what he had thought for years with nothing but a drunken night and mild embarrassment to show for it.

The window was open upstairs and he could hear the choked sound of Warrick exclaiming, “Jesus!” even out here.

Considering how much they had seen, what they had processed, it told him he was right to be shaken.

Blood and there'd been something on Gil's chest. The guy'd hacked him up, and if Gil survived, he'd have some serious scarring. If he lived. If. Maybe he could do research for Grissom, about stuff that
reduced scars and shit, because if he lived...

Well, there wasn't much for Jim to do except keep thinking 'if' because there was a lot less for him to think about doing if Gil died. Someone was going to have to call... shit, email? Gil's mother. Something. He'd work it out with Catherine. Maybe after he gave his statement, he could go to the hospital and see how things were for himself.

And here finally were the other detectives. Finally. Statement first, then the Sheriff and hospital. He had direction. He could do this.

Even though he could still smell the metallic tinge of blood in the air.

It was worse upstairs, but that was someone else's duty now. Not his. He'd been first on the scene and while that was normal for a homicide guy, he was first on scene for a friend. Probably wouldn't be allowed to work it.

Vega smiled at him, and Jim returned the gesture tightly. As long as he was a man with a plan, he'd be okay.

And if that plan led to Gil surviving and him being able to tear Millander or whoever had done this to him limb from limb, he would count himself a very happy man.

There was usually only that much blood at a murder scene. The human body only had eight pints, and Nick guessed that he was seeing at least four of them soaking the bed. From each post of the bed, there was a rope, aborted, and frayed, cut pieces of the rope. Whoever had cut Grissom loose hadn't been too careful, but Nick couldn't fault it.

The victim always came before the crime scene.

"Jesus!" Warrick said coming in behind him walking carefully. He had obviously had the same thought. "That's a lot of blood, Nick."

He didn't need to be told that and he glanced around as he saw Warrick carefully settle his kit box. Belatedly he realized that he was senior and he should make the call on who was doing what. It was hard to stop speculation running riot in his head.

"Yeah, uh..." Nick cleared his throat. "You want to start on the photographs? I'm going to print the light switch and then bring up the lights."

Warrick glanced at him and nodded. "Sure. Brass was right. Sara would flip."

Nick wasn't sure how close he was to flipping himself, but he went on autopilot to get the brush and dust even as nothing came up. Then he turned on the light and the full macabre horror of the scene was illuminated.

The place was tidy and well organized, clean except for the blood-soaked sheets and mattress. But there was a table set, ready for a meal, and Nick started to gravitate towards it even as he tried to take in the rest of the place. Some kind of demon painting on the wall, a half-rolled up picture...

"Damn, this guy was nuts... Get pictures of everything?"

"Every single inch man," Nick replied even as he closed in and took in the details. He let his eyes
slide over the table looking for any hint of extraneous trace before he focused on the food. When he did, he nearly recoiled. The plate was arranged as if it were nouveau cuisine and there was a circular blob of raw flesh that had pooled blood like a red wine sauce over the stark white of the plate.

"Rick? Take a look. Here first so I can process."

And so he could have time not to think, not to imagine that being cut out and... He swallowed convulsively.

Because that was skin. There was fucking hair growing out of that skin. Maybe chest hair, maybe... well, lower hair. Nick couldn't guess, but the set-up was weird. Plated flesh. Half a glass of wine, and some kind of dessert? Except when he leaned in towards it, there was a definitely smell.

"Shit."

"What?" Warrick joined him and winced. "Damn."

Nick could see the emotions working over his face and he was in no doubt he looked similar.

"No, it's really shit. This dessert, it smells like shit," he said trying to maintain calm. They could do this. "Take pictures and I'll get a sample for trace."

Warrick leaned closer and then nodded. "Gotcha. You reckon it was Millander?"

"I'd bet money that the whole thing is him. This is... one more staged scene, right? Griss said everything had a message, so all of this was done on purpose. It's here for a reason." And everything that had been done to Griss had a reason, but Nick didn't exactly want to think about that. Someone was going to have to process their boss's body.

There was the flash flash flash of repeated photos and Warrick covered all angles of the table and nodded to him that he was clear. He turned and took pictures of the contents of the room before heading to the bed. "Window was open when we came in. There's a bloodied knife here. Looks like the type you use to cut linoleum," Warrick said. "I don't think we're going to find a print in this whole damn place, not unless he left it here."

Nick knelt to get his kit, pulling specimen jars out of it to start getting samples of the food on the table. "Right. We'll still print everything, but... We've got human flesh on a plate, and shit molded like pudding."

"If there's a message here, I'm not seeing it," Warrick admitted. The flash on the camera made there own imitation of a storm in the room. The bed, the floor, the table. Every item methodically recorded. Every section of the room mapped without any corners cut.

"I'll look in the bathroom," Warrick murmured after a long intense silence. "Check it out, then come back and process."

"Right. Might be something in there," Nick murmured, carefully using a hemostat to get the edge of that chunk of flesh so he could pick it up and drop it into the specimen jar. He wasn't going to be sick. Wasn't going to be sick, wasn't going to think that there was a corresponding hole in Grissom that matched that chunk of flesh.

He could hear the click of the camera behind him, Warrick having found something noteworthy to photograph in there at least even as he meticulously took samples of everything there.

"You might want to try dusting in there at some point," Warrick said. "It's set up as if Millander had planned another suicide murder. Tape recorder, sleeping bag, gun. Not Grissom's gun though. Bath
"Wonder what brought about the change of M.O? I mean... Huge difference between that and cutting a guy up to put him on a plate." Nick shuffled the 'dessert' into a separate specimen jar, and marked them both.

"Maybe it wasn't him," Warrick replied thoughtfully. "Maybe he was here and then someone else. Or it could be a weird form of escalation, though usually death is the escalation."

Unless it wasn't. Death was probably merciful compared to what had gone on, and Nick leaned in to check the place out for a moment before he walked back to take more samples, of the food this time. "Death takes less time than what he did to Grissom."

"Yeah." Warrick moved over towards the bed. "I'll bag the knife and gloves and take a look at the bed. You think Sara's okay downstairs? And... you think Catherine will process at the hospital?"

"I hope she does." She'd have to, right? Kit in her ca-- no, or maybe not. No kit, since she'd gone in the ambulance and her SUV was still parked outside. So maybe one of them would end up doing it. "If she doesn't, I'll... do it." Warrick wouldn't want to. Warrick didn't like to process the living.

"You sure?" Warrick sounded concerned and just a little relieved. "No arterial spray, but a lot of blood here. We'll have to take these in... practically the entire bed. Tough looking rope. I'll check for trace in the knots. You think Grissom realized who it was and came here?"

"His car's parked outside -- probably." Nick poured the wine carefully into a trace container, and screwed a lid on. "I don't know why -- I mean, it's... it's stupid to come out to confront a suspect by yourself.

"Maybe he wasn't a suspect until he got here," Warrick said. "Maybe he just thought he was putting in overtime to get some more answers."

It was possible. Nick saw him bend close. "Think I've got semen here. The perp's maybe?"

Nick frowned a little, and looked sideways over at Warrick before he nodded. "Yeah, probably. We'll run it to be sure. Codis first." They'd have to get a DNA sample from Grissom to test it against, but that could be done with a swab at the hospital, easy, tidy. They'd need it to double-check that blob of flesh that had been sliced out of who the hell knew where.

He carefully put the other foods into trace containers, and then stepped back a little. "You want to call it?"

"Hm. Looks like the clothes on the floor look neat so Grissom was brought up here either willingly or conscious and walking. He undressed, possibly at gunpoint, though I guess we can't rule out him doing it willingly," Warrick said, his expression making it obvious he was not happy with that. "There some physical traces on the gun, so I think he was hit with that at some point. He was tied to the bed for some time and... there was some sort of sexual act, and then the physical attack. Somewhere, Millander or whoever had time to set up the table. He can't have done the knife attack too long before Catherine and Jim got here."

"Or else he'd've bled out," Nick agreed quietly. "So... he was here for hours, maybe? I mean, taking into account that he probably showed up when the rest of us went home at the end of shift..."

"Hours. Maybe unconscious? Could have been drugged or sedated maybe, or from a sharp impact. There's a trace of blood near the clothes on the floor. And Millander must have had time to do all this. It's possible he saw everything but was unable to move," Warrick agreed. He leaned over to
look at the carpet a little closer. "I'll get a close up on this. If Grissom was facing the way of his
clothes then he was struck from behind. Look... the spatter direction."

"Get shots of that," Nick agreed, looking at the glass for a moment before he bagged it. Could be
DNA on it. Anything at that point could help, anything. "We'll need to get the mattress back to the
lab, sweep it for trace, but we need just samples of anything on it for the moment..."

"It's going to be a long night. We need to get some of this back to Greg for testing. You want me to
head back with some or..." Warrick trailed off even as he placed a marker and snapped another
picture.

There was no teasing, ribbing him about his new promotion over this one. This time it was almost as
if Warrick was glad he hadn't made CSI three and didn't envy him being lead on this at all.

"Yeah," Nick finally sighed. "Yeah. Then come back. I might be done by then, and you can take it
all back. Then I'll swing by Desert Palms..." See how Grissom was doing, and maybe someone
would call to tell him before hand. "See how Sara's doing downstairs, all right?"

"Got it," Warrick replied collecting the evidence bags. "You reckon Brass has let everyone know?"

"Probably. Think he might still be around, or?" Nick shifted away from the table, making note of
everything before he passed it back to Warrick to take to the lab.

"I don't know. He's probably right; they might have problems with him working it if it isn't a
homicide. And you know, on that basis, I hope he isn't working it." Warrick replied. "They might
still be doing statements."

"Maybe. Good luck, man, and I'll see you when you get back?" Nick had an idea of where to start.
He'd start to print, dusting bathrooms, surfaces. Sara loved to dust bathrooms, but Sara didn't need to
be up there just then. It was pretty obvious that she had a thing for Gris, maybe a requited thing. Who
knew? Nick wasn't going to ask questions as long as there wasn't any funny favoritism going on.

"See you then," And Warrick left leaving him alone with the crime scene and his thoughts.

It was harder just to deal on his own. It was harder not to imagine what might have happened, what
might have been said or done. There were doubles and triples in the offing, he knew that and
welcomed it, knowing he wouldn't sleep. Not knowing it was Grissom.

Not knowing that there was a madman out there who'd managed to outsmart Grissom, and that while
they couldn't do anything directly for Griss, they could bring the guy to justice.

That was all they could ever really do for the victims, and it didn't feel like enough for Nick just then.

She'd listened numbly as they told her the extent of the injuries and how close he'd come to dying.
She supposed she should be grateful for the fact that if she hadn't started moving before she had
proof, and that she and Brass hadn't been on the way there before Millander or whoever called,
Grissom would have bled to death.

Some faint comfort, but she was exhausted from waiting. Hoping, praying to the fickle ears of fate
for Grissom to survive. And now... it seemed barring infection, he would. He was stable, and she
had been allowed in to sit with him.

Stable didn't mean conscious, so it was a silent room that she shared with him, the faint beep of a
heart monitor with accompanying line on the screen plucking up and down, up and down, at regular, steady intervals. The blood transfusion he'd had had seemed to help, but he was a man made of tubes for the moment. Oxygen going to his nose so he'd have the right mix, saline going into his blood, a tap for painkillers put into his other hand. His chest was a swath of bandages, and they were already starting to soak up seepage from what Catherine could see. She knew he had a catheter and a temporary colostomy. Or something like that, to bypass damaged tissue. She'd phased out a little when they'd explained that, how it was a necessity due to prior intestinal damage and the whole system being not quite perfect to begin with.

She'd never known that. She thought Gil was careful with what he ate, choosing the healthy option because he was that bit older. She had managed to get them to bag his effects with the minimum of contamination and then she stopped being the CSI and become the friend who held his hand and tried to stop tears from spilling over when she looked at him.

It was her fault. Catherine had been there when he'd been upstairs, when he'd been tied down, and Millander or whoever it was had already raped him, and she'd thought that he'd been up there having a great time. A consensual time, albeit in bad taste. And there was no way to make up for her mistake, for missing the clues that Gil had left or tried to leave for her.

Too little too late and it was one thing if she paid the price and quite another if he did. She'd always wished that maybe whatever it was there was between them had become something else, but that had been before she knew that Gil's preferences were... eclectic. What they had was complex, deeper than any one thing. She felt privileged that he allowed her that close. She had only seen him like that with one other person: Brass.

She could see the start of it with others. Like he was allowing himself to be friends. She just hadn't given him a choice. She'd practically forced her way into his life and now, for once, she had held back and it had been exactly the wrong thing to do.

She stroked his hand softly, murmuring, "Sorry, Gil," for about the thousandth time.

It wouldn't fix anything, but there was a prevailing theory that the ill could hear people despite being asleep. Maybe he'd hear her through the drugs and anesthesia from the surgery. Maybe it didn't matter, because she was going to keep saying sorry even if he'd had his eardrums punctured. She'd find a way to make it right again. As long as Gil was alive, she'd do whatever she could to help him even if it was just sitting there, watching him and making sure he was all right. Safe, because that madman was still out there.

She wiped at her eyes momentarily and briefly smoothed his stray graying hair. It hadn't sounded anything like Millander. She'd spoken to him, but he had been carrying the smell of sex so it had to be unless that had been consensual and then something else had happened. It was a thought she toyed with and there was a part of her that wanted to seize on that as a possibility if only because it would ease her conscience. Millander wasn't the killer, and he and Gil had been socializing when the real killer tracked them down.

But her gut didn't feel that. Her gut felt it was her fault and would not be moved. So neither would she, not until Gil was safe.

Safe, out of the window of time when stable could slip back to critical with ease, until he didn't have all of his bodily functions attached to bags and tubes, until he could get up and tell them what had happened himself. And if he never got up, then she'd...

Catherine didn't know what she'd do.
She didn't have time to contemplate that horrible possibility, that what had happened could leave Gil permanently disabled, that they didn't know what had been done, not exactly, because there was a knock on the door before a nurse opened it and leaned in. "Ms. Willows?"

"Yes?" She'd had to leave a couple of time while they put in various feeds and tubes. "You want me to leave a moment?"

"No." She stepped in, and closed the door behind her. "There's a man out there who says that he's Mr. Grissom's partner. A Mr. Brass. I wondered if you wanted to add him to the approved visitors list, or whether you wanted me to turn him away."

She could feel herself raising her eyebrows at the word partner, but nodded. "Jim, yes... put him on, please. I wasn't sure when he'd be able to get here. He was the first person I called."

Not a word of a lie any of it. Perhaps if he were here, she could let a few other people know who needed to know.

Go out, make calls, and get her head together a little more. She needed a cup of coffee if she was going to stay there much longer, and she was going to need to make a statement at some point about her earlier visit there. The nurse smiled at her, and backtracked, heading out of the door again, so that Catherine was left there with Gil and her thoughts.

Gil hadn't even twitched at the conversation, short as it'd been. She could probably blast rock music and he'd keep sleeping.

He always managed to ignore Greg's music, up to a point at least. The lab was going to be devastated and her thoughts were going random with upset and anxiety. She could hear footsteps coming down the corridor and looked up through the glass windows to see Brass talking to the nurse as he approached.

If anyone would lie to try to get in to see Gil, it was Jim. He'd never been afraid to pull strings if he had to get something done, never afraid to flash his badge around. While it pissed her off some days the way that cops did that, some days... some days it was really handy. They were part of the department, and one of the city's own, and because of that, she knew the kind of attention Gil's case was going to be getting, both from the police and the media.

She hoped Nick, Sara and Warrick had things under control because when it went public the shit was going to hit the fan. She had to admit, Jim looked the part of a frantically worried partner trying to keep it together.

"Jim..." she said as they stepped in the door and then found herself unable to continue.

"If you need anything," the nurse told them both, standing and holding the door open for a moment more, "just hit the call button there to the side."

And Jim had barely had time to step inside before she closed the door, leaving them there in an awkward silence. Jim was looking at the bed, looking at Gil the way that Catherine knew she'd looked at him when she'd come in. Shock and sick-feeling, trying to crush it down, trying to keep herself in one piece.

"Jim, why don't you... sit down."

"Hey, Cath..." Jim stepped forward. "How... How is he? And how're you doing?" She noticed his eyes kept being drawn back to Grissom's face.
There wasn't any point in saying how she was doing. He was only asking out of politeness, and Catherine couldn't help following Jim's gaze. Gil looked so much older when he wasn't animated, when he wasn't smiling and grinning and making bad, horrible jokes and chasing after a new case like a kid in a toy store. "He's... stable. If he doesn't come down with an infection, they... they think he'll pull through."

She watched some of the tension drain out of the other man as he nodded. "That's good right? All he needs is a fighting chance. He's too damn stubborn to give up on us."

Brass moved over towards the bed and pulled up a chair on the opposite side of Grissom, so he could look at him and at her at the same time without being too rude. He had no self-consciousness in taking his other hand almost possessively and Catherine started to wonder how exactly she could have missed what she was seeing right now.

Maybe he'd meant it when he'd said he was Gil's partner. Maybe he hadn't been lying at all, but she would've liked to have been in on the knowledge and...

And she'd jumped to enough conclusions for one day that she wasn't going to say it. She leaned back in her chair, watching him watch Gil. "Did you know he's had intestinal damage before? I didn't. The doctors said it could pose a problem."

"I knew he had scars..." Jim looked at her. "But not why. He's never said much about before Vegas. How much of a problem?"

He sounded worried, if a person knew enough about him to notice. It was more support to her theory. How else would he know about scars?

Catherine shrugged, trying to remember what the doctor had said. "He was more prone to infections and tissue problems, so they've..." Colostomy, but she didn't want to say it. "Put a bag on him. They're going to do a skin graft for part of his chest, to fill in a hole..."

Jim nodded. "It's... is it a reversible one?" he asked looking at her hopefully.

She managed a nod. "Just temporary, until he's had some time to heal. The damage was... bad, but not so bad that if he hadn't had whatever happened previously he wouldn't have needed it. So..." So, there was hope that he'd be all right. Nothing permanent, just physical scars. As if scars were just nothing.

Jim nodded, making it obvious that scars were neither here nor there for him. "I've told the sheriff. He wasn't happy but night shift has the case. He'll need you there," he said glancing at her a moment catching her eye. "Can you do that, Cath?"

It should have been an easy question.

Yes or no, as simple as that. Except it was Grissom, who'd found out all of the dirty parts of her past and didn't care, didn't lord them over her like Eddie did when he wanted to piss her off and push her buttons. When Gil wanted to push Catherine's buttons, he flirted a little. And it worked, every time, because hey, if Eddie was going to suggest she had an affair with Gil, she might as well have. "I..." She owed him as much for her mistake, too. Catherine couldn't turn back the wheels of time and take back what she'd missed happening.

But she could find the man who'd done it, and with Gil out of commission, she was next in seniority. "I can do that."

Brass nodded. "He's not happy with me on the case... officially, unless..."
He didn't have to say "Unless it becomes a homicide." She could hear the unspoken words clearly.

"So, I thought I could take some vacation time and be here." He looked at Grissom again and she had to admit, there didn't seem any way she was going to move him. Jim always came across as reassuringly real and solid, but that solidity could make him as unmoving as a brick wall.

If the rest of them were working the case, it wasn't as if they'd have much time to stop by and see how Gil was doing. It... made sense, even if it worried at Catherine a little. That maybe there'd been something going on that she never knew. Not that it mattered, but... "Jim? You're a good man."

He smiled a little. "You're only saying that because you've never processed my house as a crime scene." He looked back at Grissom. "Take a break, Cath. You need to, and you need to do the statement. This case is going to start stinking all the way up the chain. If you ask me, we'll be lucky if the Feds don't decide this is a career case and move in. Gotta be tight on it."

Grissom wasn't supposed to be anyone's career case. Catherine nodded, and then looked at Jim's fingers clutching onto Gil's hand. Gil didn't even twitch in his sleep, a deep thick slumber that was probably already keeping nightmares at bay. "Call me if anything, and I mean anything, changes. I need to... add the others to the approved visitor list."

"You do that, Cath. I ain't going anywhere," he replied. "Gil isn't going to wake up alone."

And it probably wasn't going to be her there. "Good. I... I'm going to call Nick, and have him come by to... document what happened." She would've done it herself if she'd had her kit, but she didn't. She wanted to do it herself, but once she got back to the scene via taxi, it'd be just in time to start presiding over the strings of the case.

Besides, she had the photos she'd taken at the scene when it had just happened.

"Nicky's a good CSI," Jim agreed as if she had been consulting him. "He'll do it right. If he wakes, I'll tell him you were here and got called away, okay?"

"Please. And then call me." Catherine only stood up reluctantly, eyeing them both. She still had her camera, case and all, and she held tight to it. "Don't forget to rest, Jim."

"Me?" He looked up at her guilelessly and she just knew for all the innocence in his tone the odds of him resting until Gil woke up were remote. "Promise I will."

"Sure." She managed to scoff that, even as she turned towards the door. Gil would probably still be asleep whenever she managed to get back; she hoped he'd be because the pain... Some things were just easier to sleep through.

If merely willing someone to wake up or live worked, Jim was confident that Gil would've been bouncing off the ceilings, and as hopped up as if he had swallowed down the lab's supply of coffee raw. But he was still laying there and even when he talked, there was no change in the traces on the monitors, no indication in anything that Gil was in there and listening. But his hands were warm. That was a good thing, when the hands were warm. Meant blood was visiting where it should and there was enough of it.

He knew he was talking randomly but Gil was used to that. He did it all the time. He was pretty sure that the important thing was to talk.

Jim had never really had to do a bedside vigil before. He'd almost missed Ellie's birth, but he'd made it in time. Just barely, just soon enough to catch the start of it, to see her enter the world. Other than
that, hospitals were good for getting an update on a victim's condition, waiting for that comatose attack victim to turn into a case ready for homicide, looking for a stupid perp who thought that they never checked hospitals for certain kinds of injuries. Drive-bys and hit and runs and break-ins all had injuries.

He'd never appreciated how time could warp and twist while you sat there. Every moment feeling like forever, and then turning around and finding fifteen minutes had passed in the blink of an eye.

"You don't want Cath getting too comfortable in your seat. Gil. I mean, she might show you up. At least on the paper work. We need you around because those piles are legendary. We say that in homicide, you know? I maybe behind but I'm not CSI. Not that I wanted to leave but..."

He'd had no choice.

"I did it to myself. It's like herding cats, isn't it? I have to admit my style is more suited to the street. You were right about that. Slipped back into it like a pair of old gloves."

He had no idea why he was saying this. Gil wouldn't remember.

It didn't matter, though. There was something to fill the silence, the faint noise of the heart monitor. Jim hadn't expected that to be there in the room -- after all, it wasn't like Gil had a heart attack. He'd just had a... everything else attack. An everything else attack that compounded some previous injury that Gil had suffered.

Jim could just hope that it hadn't been like this one. Not that he talked about his past often, either.

Somehow they'd both avoided that. It came as a shock to realize that he hadn't told him about Ellie. About how he'd come to be in Vegas. Maybe that was why they had gotten on so well. After all, he hadn't asked what he had been doing before Vegas. He only knew a very little gleaned from snippets and more about his early childhood than his intervening years.

So, one of those intervening years had done some damage to his insides, but it didn't seem as formative as Gil's earlier years, his riding around the beach on a bike looking for road-kill to pick apart. And he'd been a coroner at some point, and he'd been to schools all over the place. Gil had gone ice-fishing once, up north, and they could at least share knowledge of cold and snow and hard winters that most of Vegas wouldn't understand.

But other than that, what did he know about Gil?

Not enough. Just as he'd always been afraid that Gil would look at him and realize he was someone different. A guy couldn't be a cop that blew the whistle without feeling an obscure sense of shame. It was strange but there it was. Truth was, he'd never opened up himself so why would Gil? He knew there were scars on Gil's stomach. He'd assumed car accident and moved on. That was the sensible assumption, right?

Right. And maybe that was all it was. Car accident. Gil had a predilection towards big vehicles, tanks that were street-legal. When he'd first come to Vegas, Gil had had a big Dodge truck, a 1989 Ram that he drove until it ended up totaled when some drunk drove through a red light in '96. But there was no question that the vehicle, slightly overkill for one guy, had saved his life. He'd limped around the lab for a week or two, but hey. No long-term problems and he'd immediately gotten another big vehicle.

Car accident seemed so logical.

But Jim had a hunch, and he didn't know what to do with it.
He was starting to wonder what it was about that blood soaked scene that niggled at his mind. How the cuts in Gil's skin were smooth and curved and... similar to a line he had traced when they were both worse for drink. A line he had crossed and never been entirely sure if Gil had agreed to it or not.

Gil had been drunk out of his mind, and Jim had been... somewhat more sober. He'd driven, drunk, from the bar, and he'd parked his car on his front lawn. There was still a rut that he never filled in, and the grass had grown back. And they'd somehow made it to bed, and...

And. And, they hadn't really talked about it. That morning his head had been killing him, and Gil had already been dressed and drinking water and taking Tylenol when Jim had pulled himself out of the thick of things. It was like nothing had ever happened.

A momentary aberration in their friendship, best swept under the carpet. Only when the headache had gone, he remembered it had been good. In some ways, he wished it hadn't been so he could just completely forget but the memory stayed there, locked away and protected even as they both moved on, never acting on it, just moving on and staying friends.

They'd been friends before, so... So it wasn't even moving on. It was just being, because whatever relationship they had, boss and his field officer, was more important than anything that was still pretty racy and unsocially acceptable at the time. Eight or nine years made a hell of a lot of difference in public perception.

Now there wasn't even the work problem to deal with. Not since his screw up with Holly. He hadn't fought any of it because it was his responsibility. His team's safety always had been. They'd had some close calls but never a death.

How could he be sitting here thinking about this when Gil was so hurt?

"When you get better, Gil, we'll go to that weird restaurant you like and I'll even spring for the lobster we couldn't afford last time. I'll be broke but hey, that's not going to stop us, is it? Knowing you, you'd go and watch it being done. I'd invite the others, but I'd have to mortgage the house again or something."

And he kinda liked the place. It was small and kind of junky, but Gil lived in a small and kind of junky apartment, so it wasn't like Gil'd joke him for liking the dump.

There was a knock on the door, and then it started to crack open. It made Jim's head jerk, but it was just Nick leaning in. "Hey. I thought I heard talking..."

Jim sat back a little, not letting go of Gil's hand. "Yeah, well it's the only time I'll get a word in edgeways. Come on in. If you manage to wake him up, I'll take that as a good thing."

"I'm here to, uh." Nick managed a tight look that should've been a smile but ended up a frown. He liked Nick. There was something open and honest about him. The kid followed hunches, and one day he'd probably pass all of them in success. And he'd deserve it. "You know. How is he?"

"He's stable. So they tell me. Cath was here for best part of the shift, I sent her back. She said she would ask you to come process. I think if she'd had her kit she would have done it herself. Mind if I stay?"

"Nah." Never mind that Nick probably did mind. He didn't say as much, but doing things like that to a living person was easier, less embarrassing when no one was watching. When it wasn't a friend that they were doing it to. "You might have to move for the photos. You want to pull the sheets down and I'll get the camera out?"
"Sure." It was the last thing he wanted to do but it needed to be done. He shifted forward and pulled the sheets. It shouldn't look so grim with it stitched but it almost looked worse. He knew there was a shape in the injuries. "He's hanging in there Nick. He'd expect us ... you to do this."

"Yeah." Yeah, but Nick still fidgeted with his lenscap and closed his eyes for a moment. He was stalling, gathering himself together before he started to take pictures, flash on, illuminating the crests and falls of puckered stitching, the knotted off black threads that followed most of the deep lines on Gil's chest. There were bandages here and there over the deeper ones, but Jim understood the theory to leaving the rest in the open, to leaving Gil in a put-on-backwards hospital gown. Airing out the lighter wounds, ease of access.

Nick moved to the side to take a quick snapshot of the damage done beside Gil's right eye, the swollen, ripped skin surrounded by bruising.

He blinked every time the flash went off. "There a shape to it," he murmured as Nick took pictures. "This was a deliberate pattern of cuts." He remembered his days with CSI even if he had been more management than on the ground.

"It'd be better if it wasn't a pattern," Nick murmured, taking another picture of the damage to Gil's face before he stepped back, setting the camera back into his kit. Jim didn't have to watch him to recognize the sound of a man putting on latex gloves. "I'll blow it up when I get to the lab, follow the lines, see what it might be." Swollen and stitched as it was just then, it was hard to tell right away, but when it healed, if Gil healed...

He'd be stuck with whatever the fuck it was carved on his chest, right down to his hips, right down to the faint white scar he already had.

"Catherine had his clothes bagged up already. Not sure if they've gone back to the lab already or not." He hadn't bothered to ask. He watched Nick for a moment, trying to get a feel for how he was doing.

"I took them back when she came on scene. Then I came over here." Pretty straight forwards retelling, while Nick took too long looking for the swabs. "Doesn't look like there's going to be much evidence on him. They must've cleaned him up before they fixed him up." He was bandaged wrist and ankle, and Jim could tell Nick was distracted. He'd forgotten to remove the bandages and photograph them, but he seemed to realize it at the same time. Put the swabs down, picked up his camera again. They'd need to see what the friction damage looked like to match it to the type of rope on scene. To see if he'd been restrained in different ways, different positions.

Some days, Jim wished he hadn't picked up so damn much from the CSIs.

"I uh... I cut the ropes Nicky, at the scene," he said even as he watched Nick take the picture. "It was expertly done. Even I could tell that."

Like he was a dumb cop who didn't understand what they were doing. A habit he used over and over that amused and irritated the hell out of Grissom.

He just wanted him to wake up

"Yeah. Looks like he used a few loops." Harder to get out of. Nick photographed each one, and then pulled up the sheet at the end of the bed to photograph the marks around Gil's ankles, before hastily trying to bandage him back up. The medical tape was still sticky, so it worked, and Jim would make sure that he mentioned it to a nurse if anyone came in to change dressings.
"You okay, Nick?" he asked after a momentary pause. He was used being reliable Brass, the one who held together while everyone else fell apart. He could do that for a bit longer.

"Yeah." Nick swallowed, and didn't look like he believed his own words. "Yeah. I just... Didn't see any trace in the wounds. Is all." He was picking up the swabs again. Two of them, so mouth and... Oh.

"I'll uh... just step over here, unless you need some help?" Jim offered. Taking swabs of the more personal areas of the body was hard enough without being watched. Unless Nick wanted help. "I've done a few swabs in my time."

A statement that seemed really wrong in light of his past with Gil, but Nick didn't know.

"No, that's okay. I've got it under control." Nick leaned in to swab Gil's mouth first, using one gloved hand to open his mouth.

"I keep expecting him to wake up and critique how you're doing that," Jim said. As long as he didn't wake and critique the other sampling process. That might be a little much.

"Yeah. I kind of keep hoping this is some over-extended test of our evidence collection," Nick murmured, closing the Mouth swab. He closed Gil's mouth, and there was enough muscle tension to keep it mostly closed.

That had to be a good sign. If there was muscle tension, that meant he wasn't completely unresponsive. Jim stepped forwards towards Gil's head and said. "They did a temporary colostomy on him. There was internal damage Nick. Just thought you should know."

Before he tried to swab inside to something that just wasn't there at the moment.

Nick held that swab for a moment, and then glanced over at Jim. "Oh. Oh, then... never mind. I mean, if they, uh... Clean stuff up to operate on it." That meant an end to evidence, but it also meant that Nick's gesture of pulling the sheets back up was tinged with more than a little relief. It was bad enough to see his boss's privates, but to be moving them and swabbing around them was a different level of embarrassment.

"Yeah. They do don't they?" Jim replied as if the thought hadn't occurred to him. "So you guys all pulling doubles?"

"Yeah. Greg's even pulling one. He has stuff to process, but needs this as an exemplar." The mouth swab that Nick held up, before he tossed the un-used one back to the kit, and started to write on the box for the mouth swab. "Anything else I should know? I... It was hard to guess what his injuries would be from the scene."

"There a hit to the back of the head, to his face there. Rope injuries to wrist and ankles, internal damaged that resulted in the temporary colostomy. He had stomach problems from before, and then the knife wounds to his chest and stomach. That about covers it." Jim couldn't stop a grimace at that repetition of facts.

"Right. Could you help me turn him onto his side, or turn his head and hold it? I need to get a shot of that hit to the back of his head," Nick decided, reaching for his camera again.

"Sure thing, Nick," Jim said and very gently turned Gil's head, taking care not to detach any of the tubes. His skin was warm against his fingers, and he stopped himself from stroking gently by force of will. "That good enough?"
"Yeah." The room fell quiet, except for the click click of Nick's camera, getting a shot of the still slightly bloody knot at the back of Gil's head. Scalp wounds were messy by nature, and usually seemed worse than they actually were. Except when they were worse than they were. "Thanks. I should probably go..."

"I told Cath I'd call the minute there was any change. I'm not leaving him alone, Nick," he said and then quirked a twist of a smile. "I'm not going to chuck you out either if you wanna stay. I know you've got a lot going on, and I'm pretty much off of it as far as the sheriff is concerned."

'Yeah, well. You understand that none of us want you to be working the case, because then it'd be... a whole different kind of case than it is right now," Nick shrugged, looking at Gil while Jim resettled him lying on his back. "Let us know what happens, all right? I'll... be back later. Greg needs this sample."

Jim nodded. "Keep an eye on Catherine, will you? When you get back. I'll owe you one for that." Least he could do for Grissom was take care of his team while he was lying down on the job.

So to speak. Lying down as the job?

Nick gave another nod, gathering his kit up slowly, standing and sorting it, as if the longer he delayed, it might make Gil magically wake up. It didn't, but Jim couldn't fault the kid for it. He finally locked his kit, and gave Jim one last tight nod before he headed for the door.

He didn't point out that Nick had done a good job -- he knew he had. He knew that the analysis time on this would be nothing short of phenomenal. He had no doubt Sanders would be bouncing around the lab propelled by huge amounts of caffeine processing at rates that defied description. He knew Warrick, Nick, Sara and Catherine would have this sewn up. It said a lot about a person that they could create a team where that assumption could be made. Even if Gil would kick his ass for assuming.

He sat back down after Nick had gone, taking Grissom's hand again and preparing to re-enter the strange zone of hospital time once again. He'd forgotten to ask for them to keep him in the loop. He had no right to ask, but he hoped they would.

Worst case scenario, he could ask. He could ask them, could pry and pull at them when they came in about how the case was going.

And maybe the next time someone dropped by, Gil might even be awake.

Perhaps it was the fact she had been up over twenty-four hours, or maybe Grissom made sure he could have a comfortable couch for those too many triples he pulled, but when Catherine almost literally grabbed hold of Greg, told him to prioritize their samples to the top of the list and page her when the results were through, when she did make it to lying on the couch, it could've been the most comfortable bed in the world.

Seconds later, or so it seemed, she was filled with a need to murder the pager that she had put near her head. No where near enough sleep, but enough to function.

She could function. She had to keep functioning, because someone had to put the pieces together and find a way to catch the people who'd done that to Gil. Even if it meant leveraging herself out of the most comfortable, soft leather sofa she'd ever stretched out on. There was a slightly suspicious Gil-shaped dent, so she guessed he did use it to maintain that constant presence he had in the lab.

Catherine hit her pager off, and flung herself to her feet and out into the hallway to get to Greg's lab.
She probably looked like hell as she made her way down the corridor. Certainly people seemed to be avoiding her for some reason. "Tell me what you've got, Greg," she demanded. "And make it good."

"Okay. We've got two DNA donors. The hair that came from Grissom's clothes came back female. The epithelials on Grissom's ropes comes back female." He handed her a sheet for each. "With a high androgynous testosterone content in the hair. The semen comes back to one William Graham."

"So we've got a female. And William Graham present on scene. And maybe Millander as well if Graham isn't an alias. It's possible." Catherine studied the sheets for a moment. "Problem is... I've been caught by this sort of evidence once before. What's the deal with the androgynous testosterone?"

"Well, you take it. Well, not me. Women take it," Greg grinned. "To pump themselves up."

"Sure you don't need some, Greggo?" Catherine teased lightly as she pinched at his arm. "So... what? Xena warrior princess? Should we looking for female wrestlers or something?"

"Yeah, or someone from the Russian swim team? But I bet she's with that Graham guy," Greg said with a nod. "Have a party with that, I have more to process, Catherine."

"Good work, Greg. This Mr. Graham and I are going to become very well acquainted as quickly as possible," she said as she turned to leave the lab. "And when I catch up with him, he'll wish he'd never been born." Graham, Millander. Their serial suicide killer -- who knew how many aliases the man had, how many times he was registered with the police. Maybe they'd taken the DNA sample from him under one name, the prints under another.

"I'll wait for Nick to get in with Grissom's exemplar before I process the knife and other trace," Greg added, already turning back to his work area. "In the mean time, Warrick asked me to try and identify some trace. The foods and stuff. Sara's looking at the ropes or something."

"Good. Keep up the good work, Greg. We'll break this case soon." It was a lie. She didn't know one way or the other, but she could hope. She could hope, and she turned away from Greg to head out into the hallway. "If you need me, I'll be in Grissom's office."

She didn't wait for a response and was already mulling through the options as she moved back to the computer there. Still no call from Brass. No news being good news she guessed. So William Graham, most likely another Paul Millander alias, and some unknown female accomplice. Maybe...maybe the female accomplice had lured Grissom up there. She could see him abandoning caution if he thought someone was in danger.

If William Graham was in the system, then there would be information on him so that was the first stop. Find out what he had been tagged for before. Get a picture of things, maybe associates, places he might run.

She sat down at the computer.

If he'd given a DNA sample, then they'd taken it for a reason -- either to exempt himself from a crime or to prove him for it. They didn't take DNA samples from people for the hell of it, or else they'd all have a sample in the system as an exemplar.

But she hadn't even had time to wait for Gil's computer to boot up when she realized something by looking around to his bookshelf. One of the sideways names on the spine of one text was William Graham.

What were the odds of it being the same guy? This William Graham had written one of Grissom's
Strange, not what she would call Grissom's preferred reading, though she remembered doing an assignment on that book when she was studying to be a CSI. Graham was a 'Name' in criminalistics. The book was a long time old and still the leading text for profiling.

And if it was that William Graham then it gave a whole new dimension to the case. Couldn't be him, though, even if her eyes did start to wander the bookshelves. Gil loved books, and that reminded her to bring him some so he could read in the hospital when he woke up. When, not if.

Two Graham books were on the shelves, now that she'd noticed. The other was plainly titled *Monograph On Dating Time Of Death By Insect Activity*, and beside it was one of the books she knew that Gil had written -- *Revisions For The Standard Monograph On Dating Time Of Death By Insect Activity*.

The computer had booted up by then and she sat down after pulling out the book and putting them on the desk. Okay, now to pull up the hit from Codis.

She typed in the information and then waited and stared. She looked at the book, then back at the screen. And as no one was there she indulged in some private swearing.

"Fuck me. It is the same guy."

No pictures of the man, but the notes that went with the record said it all. He'd been brought in for questioning about some case that the FBI didn't divulge in their file in 1991. In Los Angeles, where he'd been charged and then had charges dropped for assault after he'd spit on an agent. The spit had apparently been used to exonerate him for something. Catherine could only guess, but the man wasn't stable as she started to learn looking over career histories online in odd places. No telling how much of it was reliable, but there were certain facts she knew she could verify with the FBI if she needed to.

But he was the author whose monograph Gil had modified. William Graham was the man who'd caught Hannibal Lecter as a FBI consultant.

Not ever an Agent, and that was key. He was a member of the Bureau, but as a Special Investigator that was given his credentials on a short leash for specific cases. He taught at Quantico between those bursts of activity, which took no small amount of intelligence to do. Gil would give his eye teeth to teach there if he didn't detest the feds the way he did -- and maybe he still would give his eye teeth to teach there after what had just happened to him.

Ah. This was telling. A short stay in an institution as a result of the Lecter case. They all knew about Lecter. The man was notorious. Notorious for what he did, and for getting away.

He was the same age as Millander as well and had the right sort of background to be able to pull off the crimes he had committed. And there weren't that many entomologists working with forensics. Chances were he and Gil were acquainted at the least, which might be why Gil had gone up there unsuspecting.

It was someone he knew, someone he recognized as a colleague and perhaps trusted. She remembered that he'd said he'd asked permission to write the revision, but that had been years ago. Sometimes people changed their mind.

In the context of the case, it was starting to make sense. Graham had dropped off of the face of the earth years ago, almost a couple of decades ago, after he'd dropped out of working for the FBI. For
all they knew, there were murder-suicide cases across the country, or other creative crimes that he was linked to.

She glanced at In the Mind of the Murderer, and wondered if his subject matter had finally taken hold of him. She was still at a loss to whom the woman had been on the scene. Maybe there was a woman connected with Graham. There was something there about an FBI agent, female who seemed connect to Lecter. There was no way to get away from the Lecter connection and idly she clicked through as she juggled the pieces in her head, to refresh her memory about him. And then sat bolt upright as the details came flooding back.

Details that she hadn't noticed at the scene -- not really. There had been a table set up for dinner, but Nick had said it was plated human flesh. Gil's skin, plopped right in the middle, blood serving for a sauce. Even if it was just Graham copy-catting the madman he'd helped to capture, it was a disturbing twist to remember, and now she reached for the folder of the over-alls that Warrick had shot and had developed.

"Fava beans. Chianti." She murmured aloud to herself. She'd bet next month's pay that the greens and wine would be identified like that. Had he tried to eat Gil? Damn him.

There was no way the Feds weren't going to get involved in this. Not with Lecter's MO plastered all over the case and an apparent link through Graham. There were probably a hundred and one alerts going off just from her accessing the page. If she called them, maybe she could keep a semblance of control.

Keep the case from being ripped from their hands. The mere fact that Graham had come up as a hit in a crime would get them going, but if she could keep ahead of them, look for possible properties linked to the man...

"Cath? Cath!"

It took her a moment to look up and see Warrick in the door. "You ever surfacing? Greg's running the exemplar and the knife. Nick's been back a while. Should have some more pieces soon."

She sat back, and crossed her legs at the knee again, left over right instead of right over left. "Good. Good. Anything else?"

"Well I brought you a coffee. Nothing from Brass yet," Warrick said putting it down in front of her. "How've you been getting on?"

"I..." She exhaled, and uncrossed her legs, leaning forwards to snag that coffee once she'd put the overall shots back. "I think we're going to have the FBI breathing down our necks if they hear about this case. Did Greg tell you the name of the Codis hit?"


"He was an FBI Special investigator. He captured Hannibal Lecter, and..." She gestured to Gil's bookshelf, watching Warrick's face. "Gil wrote a revision of one of his academic texts. Apparently Mr. Graham has a history of dancing the light fantastic with sanity."

"And you're thinking Graham and Millander are one and the same right?" Warrick leaned forward. "Man, I remember Lecter. He gets pulled out for every serial murderer lecture we've ever had."

"Ever," Catherine agreed. "And according to the files I could get to, Graham was wounded pretty badly by Lecter. He tried to gut him, and Graham never went back to the FBI." Sometimes a trauma broke a man, and if he'd already been on the edge, not quite fit to be a full agent...
It wasn't any wonder that he had the kind of identity problems that the MO of his crimes seemed to speak of.

"I can see that." Warrick nodded even as both their pagers went off in unison. "Greg. He must have something."

Something in the trace. Maybe, maybe it would be a case-breaker, except that if they knew who they were looking for, and he was known for being elusive even when he wasn't on the lamb, Catherine didn't know how the PD would find him. She nodded, and stood up, taking her coffee with her. "Great. Thanks for the coffee, Warrick. Looks like we haven't run out of steam just yet."

Warrick nodded and headed off down the corridor, seeing Nick come out ahead of them and Sara from further down in one of the lab work rooms. Looked like he had beeped everyone.

And when they got there, it looked like Greg was exceptionally worried and confused.

"I... am so confused," Greg started, looking at them all, Catherine in particular. "I mean, I know I'm not always let into the loop, but this is some crazy shit you guys are keeping from me."

"What is it, Greg?" Catherine asked. She really didn't have time for one of his presentations. "You paged all of us?"

"Yeah, well, I need to know for sure if Nick didn't do something weird when he took the exemplar swab," Greg shrugged, holding a couple of sheets of paper and looking at them in agitation. "Because I ran it against the other DNA we've had so far? And it's all Graham. It hits in Codis as Graham, but Nick said it was from Grissom -- I mean, the swab, the blood, the semen, it's all Graham all the time. I'm running it again."

"You must have made a mistake, Greg, 'cause that was definitely Grissom's swab I bagged up. I didn't have any other with me to get mixed up with it," Nick said. "You sure with all the stuff you've been putting through you didn't... ?"

"No, I'm dead, dead sure of it. Swab was the last thing I ran, and it's all coming back as William Graham. I have... no idea what's going on," Greg declared, sounding frustrated as he shoved the papers out at Catherine. "I test the blood on Codis; it comes back as William Graham. I test the semen against Codis, it comes back Graham. I test saliva on Codis, it comes back Graham, and all three match."

Which left one inescapable conclusion if they followed the evidence. Catherine looked at the papers and frowned. He was right. No mistake.

"Which means... Grissom is William Graham."

It caved in her theory. She'd just spent... two, three hours, maybe more fantasizing and theorizing how much the victim-perp-evidence triangle worked, how the location might work, and then she found out that the man she'd been painting up as a madman was Grissom.

Oh, god. It was crazy because the only other trace in the room was female and Millander wasn't a female...

She stopped again, trying to hunt down the spark her tired thoughts were chasing. "Greg you said the female hair was high in... endogenous hormones right?"

"Right."
"Millander could be a transsexual. That could be the piece we're missing."

"Graham is... Grissom?" Warrick repeated, looking at her sideways. "And our perp is a transsexual? I... Grissom tangled with Hannibal the Cannibal?"

Nick was frowning at Greg, probably still twisted up over the insult to his swabbing, and then he started,"Prior intestinal issues. Brass told me that Grissom was having complications from that, and there was this scar."

Gutted. Not a car accident, but gutted, and now that all made sense in a way that made Catherine feel dizzy. Maybe they could all just stand there for a few minutes in shock. A little recovery time before they followed up on the Millander angle and the trace.

"It makes some sort of sense," she said slowly even as Greg looked at her with a 'what now?' expression. She realized they must do that to Grissom a lot. They could do the jobs if they were just pointed in the right direction.

"We need to get a warrant to find an exemplar for Millander. Even a parental match would tell us if the XX is him... her..." She cast out in a tone that asked for volunteers.

Sara was still standing there in silence, but she was the first to not. "I'll do it. The police need to be notified that we're looking for him, and I'll start to see if he owned any other properties..."

"I'll, uh, go see what trace has gotten back from the table setting," Nick volunteered. That still left her and Greg and Warrick, but she could put Warrick to use.

"Warrick, I need you to find out all you can about the hire of that building, the car, anything that we picked up that might tie to something else," Catherine said. "Greg, test anything and everything you can. The full works. If there's a single print on anything, I want it found. I'm going to go speak to the FBI and... This guy who used to work with Graham... Grissom. The minute I do that, they'll be down on us like the wrath of god so I want no stone unturned. We can't wait to ask Grissom."

It didn't even occur to her that Grissom would lie if asked.

And he might. He might lie, at least lies of omission. Lying by not saying a thing at all, lying by not answering.

It was coming up on seven a.m., and that meant that the east coast was 10 a.m.. If she called, she could at least get kicked around their phone system for a while. Maybe even find something out, because she wasn't going to give Gil a chance to lie.

"Right, right. I'm on it," Warrick declared. He filed out of the room, and Greg was still staring at her.

"I'll uh, catch up on backlog."

She nodded and paused a moment. "Good work, Greg," she said and headed off thoughtfully towards Gil's office, completely unaware of how much she had sounded like Grissom throughout the entire discussion. Her thoughts were on looking up the name of that once partner from Lecter files and getting hold of him. That could be the way to bypass the crap in the system. And she was damn sure he knew about altered identities for all that she had never heard of him in Gil's life before.

It was probably just another lie of omission. She wouldn't let a friend of hers drop off of the face of the earth. She'd at least know where they were, even if someone didn't want her in their life any longer.
Catherine settled into Gil's chair, and closed her eyes for a moment before she started to look through the files. It didn't take too long for her to find reference to a man named Jack Crawford, a faint bell twinging in her head.

That was the one, and still with the FBI. She pulled up phone numbers and called, chasing her way around offices in an ever encircling loop. She felt like she needed all her experience in investigation just to get the guy to pick up the damn phone but it was when she spoke the magic words that she had information regarding William Graham suddenly obstacles vanished. She waited impatiently as she was put through for what seemed like the hundredth time.

Finally she reached someone who claimed to be his secretary -- secretary? Gil didn't have a secretary -- and there was a lag before the phone was finally picked up again. ~Crawford.~

"Agent Jack Crawford? This is CSI Catherine Willows of Vegas, I need to talk to you urgently regarding William Graham," Catherine said, sitting back in the chair and hoping the guy was not a complete idiot.

There was a pause that pulled out over the line, and then, ~What's he got himself into this time?~

Catherine inhaled. Yeah, she could see why Gil had been willing to drop contact. "He's in critical condition following an abduction and attack from an apparent serial killer. Imagine my surprise when I run my boss's DNA and the name William Graham comes up. And not only that, but certain features of the crime seem to reflect previous cases he dealt with in his past."

~Are you calling as a friend of his, or a professional colleague, Mrs. Willows? What hospital is he in?~ She could hear the phone being shifted, juggled so he could probably get a pen.

"I'm calling as both. Copy cat or not, this has Lecter all over it and so far nothing to prove he wasn't there." Catherine resisted the urge to sigh. "Forgive me for thinking the FBI might care about a potential lead on the most notorious serial killer they let slip through their fingers. He's in Desert Palms."

~Mm. It isn't that I don't care. It's that I'm not a mind-reader about what serial killer you mean. Will's tangled with enough of them. Gil. Whatever the hell he's calling himself today.~

"Gil Grissom." That was who he was, who he really was, she was sure of that. She sighed a little. "Look, I'm sorry, it's been a long... three shifts, and Gil is a good friend to everyone here. I'm just giving you a heads up because the moment this hits the database, I'm sure it will flag up all sorts of alerts."

~It already has. As head of behavioral sciences, I'm notified when links to open cases are being pulled up by local law enforcement groups.~ Head of... head of behavioral sciences? That was farther than she would've expected him to get, the way she already felt his personality grating on her. ~Do you want to give me a heads up on the other details of the case? Or should I wait until I get there? We suspect Lecter is travelling with a female accomplice...~

"We've got female DNA all over that room, but we were suspecting a transgender serial killer who has been staging bathtub suicides for a while now. He was part of the inquiries, and Gil went over there after shift, I think to ask him to get some receipts together." Sara had found the box of receipts there. "Basically, we think whoever was there subdued Gil, tied him to the bed, assaulted him, and took a linoleum knife to his torso. A piece of flesh was excised and placed meticulously on a plate set with a salad and fava beans, and there was a half glass of Chianti there as well. There was a dessert that seems to be made out of human fecal matter. All DNA at the scene shows up as Gil's or as the unknown female. I have CSIs trying to tie up the Millander angle."
~Is Mr. Millander even still alive? We've been trying to get a hold of Lecter's DNA for years now, a print, anything. He leaves nothing. Go over that scene thoroughly, and I won't call in the Vegas FBI unit just yet. Analyze everything, even the shit.~

"We're on it," Catherine said. "Trust me, everything that can be analyzed. Problem is, Millander was like that as well. Only left what he wanted us to find. You think it could be Lecter?"

~It's possible. He corresponds with Will through the FBI a couple of times a year.~ She heard a sigh on the other end, and some typing sounds.

"Jesus." Catherine inhaled. "What the hell else don't I know? Anything that might help us?"

~Check Graham's house. There might be something in a letter that didn't make sense to us in this new context. I'll be there in Vegas later today. Is there anything else I can do for you, Mrs. Willows?~

"I'm sure that we'll talk in person," Catherine said and swallowed hoping she had done the right thing. "Call me at the lab. They'll find me if you need to pass on anything."

She had a key to Gil's house. She could go in there herself, do that. Spare him any embarrassment, or as much as she could. He corresponded with a serial killer? It didn't sound like Gil, none of it sounded like Gil. Gil liked to race insects, Gil didn't write letters to a killer.

~All right. Thank you, Mrs. Willows.~ And then Jack Crawford hung up.

So much for getting any sleep at all. The best she would be able to manage was to have a coffee so black and strong it would probably be a toxin if run through trace, or test as a hard drug.

If she stopped she would crash, and there was no time for that now. She had until later that day before the Feds got involved. She just hoped that would be long enough

And if she obtained a warrant, it wouldn't quite feel like she was breaking and entering into a friend's home.

His fingers were warm.

Everything else was cold or hot, chilled or burning because... Because he wasn't sure why. He wasn't sure why everything was one extreme or another, why it felt like there was a knife going through his skull before he even started to crack an eye open. It told him something bad had happened, but the memories were thick and hazy, slipping away for the moment like whatever he'd been dreaming.

He thought he had been dreaming the voice but it was still there, still talking in a low familiar tone as warm and comforting as the warmth in his fingers.

"... then you said, I wasn't complaining there was a cockroach in my soup, I was hoping you could get me a jar to take it home in. I've never seen one do the backstroke. You remember that, Gil? I nearly choked on the pasta laughing so hard. I tell you what, we could skip the lobster place and go there when you get better, right? I mean, I can afford it, and it's more my sort of style. Sanders would call it grunge. Me? It's the sort of hard-boiled place a detective like me hangs out. Just... wake up soon will ya? I just..." The voice fell silent a moment.
He twitched his fingers, stretching them a little and testing his range of movement carefully. He could move, and it surprised him a little. He shouldn't have been surprised to move. Everyone moved, all of the time, except there was a phantom pain, a gritty ache in his wrist when he moved the other hand a little at the elbow. No ropes.

No ropes. He wasn't there anymore, he was somewhere safe. Jim was somewhere safe, instead of there with him.

"Hey....hey, Gil? You with me here?" Jim sounded close. "Can you hear me? Or was that just a random twitch? Come on, I'm doing a bedside vigil here; least you could do is come around dramatically. I've watched daytime TV, I know how it should go."

His right eye still hurt to open, and Gil could feel it watering when he finally managed to open it, his left eye sympathetically rebelling along with it. The light in the room was too bright, even with the blinds closed, and that made the wincing worse. Jim was close, but his eyes didn't focus just yet. His throat was dry, too, but he swallowed and managed to open his mouth a little. "Hey."

"Hey." Jim's voice was soft and gentle in contrast to the teasing tone he had been using. "Glad to see you could join me, Gil. You with me, Grissom? You want me to get the doctors?"

He sounded a little awestruck, and Gil didn't know why. He swallowed again, his dry mouth sore, and a moment of fuzzy exploring found stitches. Inside, why would they be inside except-- oh, the biting. The biting. Gil remembered that now, and closed his eyes again, tightly. "Wa'er?"

"Sure, Gil. I'll ask the nurse, okay? Just hold on." The warmth at his hand and fingers went away briefly as did the sense of someone being close. "They'll be coming in in a little. They said you can sip some. I've got a straw. Just don't move, okay, Gil? Here, the straw is here..."

The loss of Jim in the room, the sound of his voice the clearest sense Gil could manage, left him adrift, groggy and dazed until Jim's voice came back. It was enough to get him to try to open his eyes again, enough to catch sight of the straw. Moving his hands ached, but he managed to bring the one that Jim had been warming up to grip loosely over the glass, over top of Jim's hand. "Hurts t' move."

"I bet it does," Jim replied in that soft voice as if he was worried if he spoke to loudly Gil might break. "It's okay. I can get the straw where it needs to be. Here... that's it." Jim was determined to make it easy.

And he did. Gil could suck down a few mouthfuls of water before his mouth started to ache from the cold, and he lowered his head a fraction, letting go of the straw. Jim hardly backed up at all, probably ready to offer him the straw again. Gil's fingers clung loosely over Jim's wristwatch, and maybe that was what kept it there. He remembered that watch, the time Jim had gotten it stolen on a scene by a klepto; it was an old, worn watch, but now it was a point of pride that he keep it. There was a story to it, and that was all either of them had. Stories, memories, and Gil didn't want to reach back very far with his mind.

He needed a springboard in his mind to get past the last few hours? Days, maybe. Days. "How 'ng... 've I been here?"

"About a day and a half," Jim said softly. "We got you out of there as quick as we could." His fingers never left his own. "More water or enough?"

As quick as they could. As soon as they'd worked it out, and that made Gil close his eyes again. It wasn't their fault he'd walked into a trap. It wasn't their fault that he hadn't trusted his instinct. "More?"
"Sure, Gil," Jim replied and moved the straw to his lips again and then spoke as Gil took another sip. "I sent Catherine back. Well, it would have been home, but it was back to the lab. She was keeping this spot warm for a while. Nick's been in. The others are probably going to be turning up sometime whenever they come up for air. Everyone is really worried about you."

Gil lowered his head again, peering back at Jim. The idea that everyone was worried about him probably wasn't as far of a stretch of reality as Gil first wanted to guess it was. He could remember blood, so much damn blood, and that had been him looking at himself, not an observer with clear eyes looking at the same scene from a better situation.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Jim agreed bringing the glass down and absently stroking his hand. "Me on the other hand, not worried at all. Because you owe me twenty bucks and there's no way in hell I'm letting you die without getting that back." The attempt at a light tone was ruined by the fact that Brass had to clear his throat before and after saying it.

"n't happen," Gil managed to tell him, swallowing again. The water felt good, cold, and his throat a little less dry. It hadn't helped de-cloud his head, but he could string words together, little by little. "'u slept?"

"Once. About a year ago... no, maybe two," Jim answered putting on a thoughtful expression. "I was doing my sleeping vicariously."

Gil wanted to laugh, and he made a noise that might've been a chuckle. He wasn't sure. "Should rest. 'll rest, too."

"Okay, now I'm worried. I think I should call a doctor. Did you just say you would rest?" Jim asked with the sort of expression he usually reserved for really odd revelations.

"Yeah." Gil blinked slowly, and even nodded a little. His right eye still hurt, still barely opened, but it was something. "Don't... have to think when 're a... sleep."

"I know, Gil, but you won't be alone," Jim promised. "Unless you want to be." He twitched his fingers again, clutching tightly. Gil probably could have explained that he hated waking up in a hospital room alone -- when everything hurt and the drugs were just there, hovering at the edge of his mind and distorting the line between memory and thought and reality -- but he didn't have to. "No."

'No' would suffice.

"Okay then. So I'll be around and then the guys are pretty much lining up to be with you," Jim said. "So you don't have to worry about someone not being here. They might toss us out on occasion, but we'll be around."

"Good." He managed another squeeze, and shifted in the bed, grimacing. Everything hurt, but hopefully it meant it was still there. Attached was better than phantom pain. "Kinda shape 'm I?"

He knew Jim would give him a straight answer.

"Well, you're alive. Apparently you lost a lot of blood and that was the highest risk for a while. You're gonna have scars on your chest, although the doctors say they'll do what they can to minimize it," Jim looked at him. "You had internal injuries, Gil. They messed up your gut that was already messed up or something. They've given you a temporary colostomy. Turns out they can do that now
and there shouldn't be a problem putting it all right, but they had to extract it or something."

"Wasn't sure I was going to live. At all." There was something hazy, at the edge of his mind, but the repetitive motion of shifting his fingers didn't ease it, didn't bring it closer into focus or push it further away. "Millander"

That Millander was brought in for questioning back for the hand thing. Before he was booted as boss.

"It was him then? Catherine had a call. Didn't sound like him," Jim murmured. "I don't want you pushed right now, Gil. You just woke up."

He finally did manage a muzzy laugh and squeezed Jim's hand again, watching his face even as his eyes lost a little focus. He wished he had his glasses. Of all the days to be farsighted... "I have? Keep thinking I'll wake up at home."

"You'll be here a while before that, Gil," Jim answered, his grip back firm and gentle. "Gonna take a while to recover. And you're not doing that on your own."

"No?" It took him a minute to process that Jim meant not alone, not that he wouldn't be doing it at all.

"Well, I've got vacation time stacked up. I max out on overtime. No big deal." Jim sat back. "I can hang with you until you throw me out. Hospitals throw you out too quick."

"Then you end up back there." Jim looked comfortable, a little sleepy, and it made Gil shift a little, taking a slow breath. "Good... not to be there."

"Yeah. You need something, Gil? Probably some drugs or something?" Jim still hadn't let his hand go. "I can get someone? You should probably get the official run down or some rest or something."

"Just want to sleep." He turned his head a little, but couldn't manage to focus. "'s a call button?"

"Aside from me? Yeah." Jim reached for it to put it within easy access. "There we go. You sleep some more, Gil, and I'll tell Catherine you've decided to live. You're not going to make me a liar, are you?"

"Nah." He tried to give a smile, and closed his eyes again. That felt better. The water had helped, and he was safe. It was all right to wake up again if the urge hit his subconscious self. "Owe me roach soup, anyway."

Jim smiled, his familiar broad open smile. "You heard that? Hope you missed the promise about the lobster dinner."

"You promised lobster?" Gil managed that blearily, just when he heard the door creak open. "Huh. 'n I thought... I owed you money."

"Yeah, and I owe you dinner, so..." Jim looked up to see who was coming in. "We'll call it even, yeah?"

"Mr. Brass? Did you press the call button?"

Gil managed to raise the hand that Jim wasn't holding onto. "I d'd. Hurts."

"Gil's decided to take matters into his own hands," Jim replied sounding oddly proud and relieved of
the fact. "Look, Gil, I'll go let Catherine know what's going on, okay? You do... medical stuff. I'll be back."

"Sure." He wasn't sure he'd still be awake, but he managed to open his eyes before Jim had finished the act of getting to his feet and letting go of his hand. "See you 'round?"

"Next time you wake up, I'll be here, Gil," Jim reminded him patiently. "If you're awake enough, we can try a crossword or something."

Grissom knew, even if the thoughts were vague, that Brass hardly ever bothered with things like crosswords. He was the one who liked the puzzles and that was a nice thought to be fading into sleep with.

He could close his eyes and ignore the tugging of bandages as the nurse started to tend to him. He was safe and in good hands, and Jim would be back.

It was a start.

The relief at Grissom waking up, recognizing him, even responding to some of his feeble attempts at levity, had been enough to unknotted the huge ball of tension that had been twisting up his insides. With that came the exhaustion, but he had been a cop too long not to be able to push back tiredness and hold it at arm's length. He'd stay until one of the others could be here. They could work it out. There was no one waiting for him at home, but if he wanted to spend the vacation time with Gil once he was released, he would have to figure out how to work now.

But he had to tell Catherine, Nick and everyone that Gil was actually awake and sounding okay. For all they knew he could be getting worse. People died in hospitals. Holly had died after the surgery that was meant to save her life and...

Jim swallowed and headed up the corridor to find somewhere he could use a phone. He hadn't lost Gil. He may have lost Holly, but not Gil. so all he had to do was keep him.

It wasn't that hard. One guy, one man, one life, and it wasn't like Gil was going to up and sneak off on him. He'd smiled and everything, almost laughed, said some pretty coherent things. That had to count for something. Had to be a little like survival for Gil to put up all of that effort in the face of what had happened.

In the face of some bastard raping him so badly that he needed surgery and a bag. That wasn't going to be easy to handle, and Jim didn't know where he'd start. Just that he'd be there, trying to start. As long as Gil survived, as long as they released him from the hospital.

There was a pay phone right by the nurse's station, and a man in a crisp navy blue suit was standing at the desk in a way that made Jim want to double-take, because he wasn't a local cop that he recognized.

"Yeah, I need to get in to see Mr, uh, Grissom. I'm an old friend of his."

He didn't look like an old friend that Jim knew. And Jim knew old friends going back over a decade. Hell, he was the old friend. Which meant either this guy was trying something on or he was from before that time.

"I'm sorry sir, you're not on the approved visitors list. Mrs. Willows was very adamant about that."
Jim tried not to smirk. Adamant was a good word for Catherine.

"Mrs. Willows called me to tell me to come here." He had an accent a lot like Jim's -- maybe New York instead of New Jersey, but not Nevada, not California, not Wisconsin or Michigan -- and an edge to his tones. Then he reached into his jacket, and pulled out a badge. "I'm Special Agent Crawford, and this is an FBI matter."

Oh joy, the FBI. Not that he was going to take the guy's word for it because anyone could fake up a badge and who the hell was Agent Crawford to be turning up at Gil's bedside when he was barely conscious. Things could wait. He could see the nurse wavering a bit and stepped forward. "Friend of Gil's huh?" he said. "Let's have a little chat, shall we?"

The man turned, giving Jim a bland look. "And you are?"

Instantly Jim decided he didn't like this guy. He was like that and sometimes he was wrong but right now he was tired and this FBI guy had a tone that rankled. "Captain Jim Brass. Gil's... partner." He belatedly remembered how he had gotten himself on the visitors in ICU list. "And I have to say, Gil's never mentioned you."

"He wouldn't," Crawford admitted. The tone of Jack's voice seemed to shift a little at the mention of the word 'partner', but it wasn't a shocked kind of voice shift. "I'm his partner from his Quantico days. Mrs. Willows called me from the CSI lab about this case. Why don't we go sit somewhere and talk?"

"That sounds like a good idea. I have to phone Catherine anyway." And he would be checking on the other man's story. "Could do with a coffee. Want to head down and get some?"

"I could go for a coffee -- I'm on east coast time." The implication that he'd flown all the way out there was somewhat unsettling if his story checked out. Most FBI people couldn't drop everything they were doing to show up somewhere because an old partner -- either someone he'd had worked with or a 'partner' partner -- was hurt.

Wait. Quantico? Gil hated the FBI.

"Quantico huh? Some time back, yeah?" Jim led him downstairs towards the canteen.

"Back before he changed his name and ran away to Vegas, yeah." That was almost a laugh, and the man casually put his hands into his pockets while they walked. He was taller than Jim, and lean like one of those evil dogs he couldn't remember the name of.

"Changed his name?" Jim stared a moment. This had not been part of his imaginings. Fuck. "Witness protection?" If it was, he didn't think much of their protection.

"No -- Will never thought too much of that shit. Court processed, take an ad out in the paper, and change your name protection. For all the good it did him, huh?" There was that rough, half-sad laugh, a little bitter as he stepped ahead of Jim and opened the door that led from the stairwell out into the hallway.

Jim was momentarily tempted to push him down the stairs, but the moment passed. He prided himself on his connection with his petty self and was perfectly comfortable with it. But the agent guy was saved by the sheer fact he didn't have the energy.

"It was a Vegas serial killer. Could have happened to any of them."

"Doubt it." He stopped, just out of the stairwell -- it was a damn shame Jim hadn't had the energy,
either, because that twisted last flight of stairs down to the lobby would've been hell on the guy's neck -- and into the safe hallway. The second floor had the gift shops, canteen, everything anyone with a loved-one sick or dying could need to distract themselves. "You're not a Vegas native, are you? What was your name again? I'm Jack Crawford, by the way -- head of the Bureau's Behavioral Sciences Division."

"Jim Brass. Once New Jersey PD." He deliberately didn't say it was good to meet him. It wasn't. There he was turning up making dry almost blaming comments about Gil and... he needed to find out what the deal was from Catherine before he said too much or hit the guy.

"Why don't you go on and get us some coffees?" he suggested. "I'll phone Willows." And she better have an answer or this guy would be flying out of the hospital all the way back to the Bureau without the aid of a plane.

"She'll explain all of this to you." That was said almost dismissively, and then Jack wandered over to the line for the coffee place. Great, good. He could pull out his cell phone and call her. And figure out what the hell was going on.

He walked until he was out of the zone where cells were forbidden and called, looking impatiently after the other man. Catherine had a lot of explaining to do. And so did Gil, but he was used to him being complicated.

Will. Jack had called Gil Will. Maybe he'd been Will Grissom. Or Will something or other before, and it seemed weird, but so did the way that Gil plopped down in Vegas out of the clear blue, got the job, and just fit. He fit, and there was no background story, no fuckups from another office to weigh him down.

One ring, two rings, and Catherine answered with a sleepy-sounding, "Willows."

"Cath, it's Jim." He probably sounded about the same and had to stifle a sympathetic yawn. "Thought you'd like to know Gil came around not long ago."

"Hazy, but you know. Being Gil. Aware enough to pick me up on a few things. He's resting again now but... there's a guy here, Cath, from the FBI. Says he talked to you. Called Gil 'Will', and let's just say I might be tired but I think I'm missing something."

"Yeah. Jim... I was going to call you, but I'd guessed you'd have your cell phone off. Greg tested the... semen from the scene through Codis, and it came back as Will Graham. I couldn't find any pictures of Graham, so I started to look at the angle that maybe he'd been Millander's accomplice, and then when Greg ran the exemplar and the blood, it... It's Gil, Jim. We're tracking down another lead, but there's female DNA all over the place, and there was human tissue in the... feces on the scene. We haven't identified it yet, but it looked like it was cooked, so who knows if we can get anything out of it. We're... Greg is in the office taking a nap. He doesn't want to go home and the dayshift guy is queamish."

"If anyone can pull DNA out of that, it'll be Sanders," Jim said even as he tried to get his head around why Gil had changed his name. Someone else might have felt betrayed or shocked and resentful but it never occured to him. It was just another fact. Part of the missing story to him, that gap in Gil's life that they hadn't talked about. That didn't make him someone else. "So what's the deal with Graham and this guy Crawford?"

"You... recognize the name 'Will Graham', don't you?" She asked, and it honestly wasn't a rhetorical
question. Catherine was waiting, probably guessing how to explain what she knew

"It's familiar, I'm just trying to place it," Jim replied trying to stir his mind to consciousness from too little sleep. "The only Graham I know is the text book guy who...." He trailed off as all the pieces slotted into place. "Right. I get it."

"Who took down Hannibal Lecter," Catherine finished for him. "What wasn't well publicized out of law enforcement circles was that Lecter tried to gut Graham, and it ended like a bad Mexican standoff. Both of them really tried to kill each other. I..." Catherine sucked in a shaky breath. "I'm having trouble reconciling that to our Grissom. But, I looked through the files, and started to call to see who might help. All of the evidence is pointing to... at least a Lecter copycat. Agent Crawford is one of the bureau chiefs, head of behavioral sciences. He knew Gil when he... before. The Lecter case is his domain anyway."

Jim exhaled. He'd been really hoping it wasn't. "Gil said it was Millander. He definitely said that so... copy cat, I think. Or something."

"I still needed to call, Jim. Just... handle him how you want to handle him? And get some sleep, for god sakes."

"Yeah. I will... when there's someone else here. He doesn't want to be alone," Jim replied. "You should first, Cath, you need to be sharp if the Feds are moving in." Especially if they tried to play her like they were him. Catherine had as much of a temper as he did and when it came to Gil, she could be very defensive. If she's been there listening to how he was saying things, Jack Crawford might well have a broken nose by now.

"Thanks. I will. Call me if anything changes? I'm going to try to get there when I can." And he could understand that. She'd have to take a break, she'd have to see Lindsey, all sorts of things.

"Sure. I will, Cath." He hung up and looked at Jack Crawford. The agent didn't get points for his illustrious career, not from him. As far as Jim was concerned he didn't have the right to come around making cracks about Gil when he was at death's door. Maybe this side of death's door but too damn close nonetheless. And if he was worried about him, where had he been in the past when Gil had a few close shaves?

At least he'd paid for the coffees.

It was something, but it didn't count for much. He'd even staked out a small corner table, and Jim wasn't sure if it was luck or the man's personality that had made it so that there wasn't anyone else around that table.

He sat down heavily. "Thanks. So you're here because of the copy cat, yeah?" He didn't have time to mess around, let alone energy.

"I'm here because Will's hurt. Personal and professional reasons." He took a sip of the coffee, and cut in,"And, I know what you're thinking. But I don't keep tabs on Will. No one tells me what he's up to. I hear it from his ex-wife three months after the fact. I hear it from our mutual friends in academia. I want to see how he's doing."

"Well it's a helluva time to catch up." Jim said bluntly. "He's only just come around once and he'll be out again now." Ex-wife?! Jesus. Okay he was surprised by that. "So why haven't you kept up with him?"

He shrugged his shoulders loosely. "He likes the delusion that no one knows who he is. It's kind of a
funny secret in the academic fields that he's... I mean, he just picked up where he left off. We don't talk about it, and he can pretend no one remembers who he is."

Come to think of it, Gil was surprised that there were people who cared, who worried about him. The difference being that in Vegas, no one would let him get away with thinking that for long. He didn't think he could ever be the type of friend who would let someone like Gil walk out of his life. Never.

"Because of what happened. The attack."

"No. No, after Lecter..." Jack cleared his throat, and then took another sip of coffee. "He moved out to California with Molly and Kevin. He fell apart, couldn't... He needed help and he got it. Worked odd jobs until he pull himself together, and worked for the coroner's office out in LA county. But we had a case come up, the uh. Geeze, Tooth Fairy killer might ring a bell to you. He struck in Atlanta and Birmingham on a -- it's a long story, but after Lecter told the killer where his family was, and there was this big standoff... He fell apart again. Molly left him. Or Molly left him and he fell apart again -- the order doesn't really matter."

Jim really wished he was more awake to appreciate all this. He knew he'd remember it but right now he was finding it hard. Gil had a son. A son he could never see, and again it was an assumption but one he felt confident in because he knew Gil. Working around death every day had a way of making you get to know the people around you really closely. Names were window dressing. "Right. Is it possible that it could be something to do with Lecter?"

He remembered that. The killer fucked with people's heads so effectively sometimes they nearly murdered themselves. Ripped off their own faces. What if Millander had been Millander, but a primed tool of Lecter? If there was still some sort of revenge thing there with the serial killer, then it was possible. He did remember the Tooth Fairy case. It had been big around the time he was starting to clean house at Jersey.

But it wasn't his case, and then it had come to a fatal end for the suspect, so no big follow up court trial. "This case? Mrs. Willows sent me what evidence she could, and I'm certainly suspicious of what's going on. If it's not a copy-cat, then... it's going to get him out of the woodwork, you know? So if it wasn't him before it's going to be him now. He and Will... hell, I'll go as far as to say before we caught him, he was damn charming. He helped us break a few other cases and Will was real close to him."

"Millander was like that," Jim commented absently. He'd have to speak to Grissom about that. He could read between the very clear lines he was drawing out. He rubbed absently at the bridge of his nose. "If you're here to help Grissom, you won't have a problem, but I'm telling you. Talk like you did earlier in front of his team and you'll be taking a one way trip to the body farm."

"How was that, again?" And maybe he wasn't sure and maybe he was.

Brass just looked at him and shook his head. "Fine. Play it that way."

"Look, don't get extra defensive just because you're sleeping with him. I know you have to be stressed out right now, and this is a lot to take in," Jack offered solicitously, taking another sip of his coffee. "Will and I go way back, but not that way. The problem with Lecter is that we don't know what he looks like anymore. He has red eyes, but there are contact lenses nowadays, and we don't know what kind of plastic surgery he's had. He doesn't leave fingerprints anywhere -- leaves gloves."
Jim had a brief flash back to gloves soaked in blood. "We had gloves," he admitted. Red eyes, huh? He looked at eyes a lot because that was where he got some of the strongest indications of lies but... "Why now? After all this time?"

"Who knows? It could've been that his name came up in a newspaper that he read somewhere; it could be that he said something that struck Lecter a certain way. Could've been the day of the month and the position of the moon. He could be bored with the last agent of mine he waltzed off with."

And now there was a flash of deeper sadness, bitterness in Jack's eyes.

Ah. Now Jim got it. He knew he looked like the sort of cop who thought with his muscles (though they could use some work after all those years in CSI) and he capitalized on that but he could see the connections. Crawford was bitter and defensive because he thought Gil should have been there to stop that happening. "He took an agent of yours?" He had the temptation to needle him a little but managed to behave. Just.

"He briefly breezed through America last year, long enough to kidnap an agent he dealt with just before he made his escape in 1990." Gil had been with Vegas CSI for five years by then, and Jim had still been in Jersey. Court, probably, because for a while there it had seemed like if he wasn't there for a case testifying, he was there for the god-damned divorce.

"They dead or alive?" Jim said bluntly. There was no other way to ask the question.

"If she's alive, she probably wishes she were dead," he countered, voice flat-edged. "Or she can't think for herself at all anymore. He really... gets to people. Gets in their heads and fucks them up so badly that it's a wonder any of the survivors can string two words together. Will's strong. He'll hang in there whether it was Lecter or not."

That was something they could agree on, but that didn't mean he was going to force him to do it alone. This time he had friends who would go out on a limb for him, willingly.

"You reckon you can catch him?"

He cocked an eyebrow at Jim. "Yeah. I'm also the god-damned Easter bunny. The fuzzy tail sticking out of my ass is hell to hide in a suit."

"I didn't like to say anything, but yeah." Jim gave a smirk of amusement. "Personally I just thought you'd cramped in your pants."

Jack just smirked, and didn't bother to try to strike back. At least he could take as well as he gave. "Look, the only person who ever got into his head won't. Lecter is ten steps ahead of us at all times. He's so insane that he's sane, if you catch my drift. Will could at least bring us up to one step or right on top of him, but Will... It's not good for him."

"Damn right it's not. If you think you're going to ask him to try that now..." Jim replied. "He'll have enough to deal with. But he's got a team he's proud of. That has to count for something. And they're good. I used to head them up."

That finally gained him an eyebrow twitch, and a curious edge to Jack's expression, but he didn't ask whatever he was thinking. "I'm not going to ask him. I'm going to keep the field office out of this, call in a couple of people from my division if the evidence looks like it warrants it. One wrong step, and if it is him, we'll have a bloodbath on our hands."

"And if it's not?" Jim asked already wondering if it might come to that. If it was going that way he would have to nail Grissom to the floor to get him to stay. He could see what the deal was with his
ex-wife and son. God, it explained a lot about Grissom’s lack of relationships.

"If it's not, then we have a copy-cat on our hands and the FBI will extend an offer of resources to you -- use of manpower, lab, whatever the city needs." Jack swallowed a mouthful of coffee, and sighed. "Jesus, I need to talk to the sheriff. I hate courting sheriffs."

"Atwater is courtable. Mindful of the public spin and the opportunity, like all sheriffs, but willing to cut a little slack for the right result." Jim advised. "He's had to put up with Gil and me for a decade or so, so he's used to a lack of diplomacy."

"Great." Jack's mouth tugged into a smile. "So, do you mind if I duck into the room to see him for a few minutes? I just... want to see how he is."

"He'll be asleep," Jim warned, though considering that might be the best time for Crawford to make his visit. "But yeah, okay."

"Okay. It's funny how things change, you know. Hey, does Will still smoke? He's probably jonesing for one now."

"Wasn't smoking when I came to Vegas," Jim replied knocking back the last of his coffee. "Never has here."

In fact, on the whole, Grissom went for the healthy option in all things.

That was funny to think of -- what had apparently flipped the switch in Gil's head? "Never? Huh." Jack sat back a little, swirling the sediment at the bottom of his cup. "Huh. Part of his new scientific approach to things, right? No interference on crime-scenes I bet. He completely rejected his other skills last I knew, so it wouldn't surprise me."

"No interference. Following the evidence," Jim confirmed. Had there been another way? "Why, did he used to?"

"Will's an editeker. It's... complicated to explain." And it meant that Jack either didn't want to explain or couldn't work out how to explain it to Jim, because he just shrugged. "But he used to get into the perp's head to find out who or where the guy was going. He was something else when he worked a scene."

"He still is," Jim replied truthfully. "But in a different way, I guess."

Not that different though. He looked at the evidence and from that managed to almost see what had happened in a way that he knew a lot of CSI's could not do. And that led him to test for different things, look in the right places. If someone got away with it it was because the evidence wasn't there not because it had been missed.

Gil didn't miss a damn thing, unless it had to do with people. And even then he caught things that Catherine missed, subtle things. "Yeah, well. Will was one of our best, but not agent material. Probably better for him -- he never liked to shoot."

Brass didn't exactly like to shoot but it was something he was comfortable with. Trigger happy was a lesson well learned back in New Jersey. And this whole deal struck him as off. Brilliant but not agent material? So they had some sort of set up where Gil got his brains sucked dry without any of the benefits and security. He probably even realized what they were doing to him. "No. But if the job is going right in CSI that situation doesn't come up that often."

He just wished Gil had pulled a gun on Millander.
Because walking Gil through that, through I.A, poking around and asking questions, and seeing shadows of guilt and self recrimination, sure. He could handle that so much better than he could handle what he was facing just then. It was so much easier, so much simpler if the matter was dead in a literal way.

"Yeah. He used to carry all the time, you know? Two and three of them, because he always dropped one or something. It was kind of funny... Well, not really, but we had to find it funny that he shot Lecter with the one he kept at his ankle. That spare we always teased him about."

"He doesn't anymore," Jim said wondering if it would have made a difference. Probably not. "Any way, let's get back there. You're probably wanting to see him, then see Catherine or something."

"Sheriff first, but yeah." Jack stood up, eyeing Jim before he started to head back down the hall. "You mind if I ask you a question?"

"Ask away," Jim replied. He scratched at his cheek and felt the rasp of stubble. He hadn't realized he'd been here that long. But he was coming up on the twenty-four hour mark, and the nurses were probably trying to think of a way to get his handcuffs off of his belt so they could tie him up somewhere just so they wouldn't have to see him.

"You said you were his partner to get in to see him, right? Because you don't really seem like his type."

Visualization was a powerful thing, as was the nice solid punch he was currently visualizing. "Yeah. I did."

Very neatly every shred of possible hope that something good might come out of this shiveled up and died. He could have lied but there really wasn't any point. "He never got around to adding me to the emergency contact list because until recently I was automatically contacted as his boss."

After all, why bother lying if Gil wasn't coherent enough to be in on the joke. Hell, maybe Jack was trying to fuck with his head. Jim didn't know, and he got a little ahead of Jack on the stairwell. He tripped because he was tired or something, he was damn well going to take that bastard with him right to Broken Neck land.

"Yeah, you mentioned that. He's been doing all right here in Vegas? No problems?"

"He's the best," Jim said without hesitation. "Always has been. We rank high and it's mainly due to him."

That was the pure truth. Gil trained the best as well, and more rarely made them find their own strengths to work as a team. He'd spent a lot of time keeping the bad parts of the job away from Gil so he could do what he did best.

And now that Holly was dead, he was back in Homicide, and Gil had to deal with the bad parts as well as the good. He still wasn't sure of that -- sure Gil could lead them, but he hated the political shit. He was a good field officer -- that didn't mean someone made a good supervisor. Didn't mean that Jim had been a good supervisor, either, because he'd had a CSI die on his watch.

It wasn't the best time to start beating to death that old horse in his head, but no time was.

"Yeah. We used to call him the King Cobra. You want him under your porch picking off predators instead of under someone else's."

"King Cobra huh? I'll remember that." Gil wasn't as dangerous as that made him sound. They were
close to the room. He waved at the nurse on duty. "Okay to go in?"

"Yes, Mr. Brass. Is he with you?" Just double-checking. It was tempting to say no and leave him in his dust, but. But, he had a feeling that antagonizing the guy at the start wouldn't do him much good.

"Yeah, he's just making a short visit," Brass said. "Catching up with how things are."

"All right. If you need anything..." Like a security guard she seemed to be implying, but let them Waltz right past her. Jim really hoped that Gil was still asleep. Who needed to put up with that kind of shit, right?

"What room is it?" Jack asked.

"Just along here," Jim guided him in, entering quietly looking automatically at Gil. The shock of seeing him so hurt hit him again. He suspected it would carry on doing that because he couldn't imagine getting comfortable with the idea of him being hurt. "Don't wake him," he murmured.

Behind him when they stepped into the room, Jack sucked in a slow breath. "Jesus. What happened to his chest?" Newly changed dressings, while Jim had ducked out for that really not fucking restful coffee break, were already starting to seep through with blood here and there. Or drainage. Jim was just glad that Gil was mostly covered with the sheets.

"Millander took a linoleum knife to him," Jim replied secretly glad to see that assurance the other man had shaken a little. Perhaps now he would understand why his tone had been so damn offensive.

"A linoleum knife?" Jack sighed, hovering near the chair. But he didn't sit down, just stared at Gil's face. "Either that's a coincidence or he did a hell of a lot of research. Or..."

"If Gil said it was Millander, it was Millander. Unless Millander is Lecter," Jim said moving over and sitting down next to Gil again. It was a now familiar spot. "Which is something you might be able to help with."

"Might be able to. We'll see." Jack reached a hand out, petting Gil's hair for a second, stroking it back from the sticky edge of medical tape that was holding gauze down over that scrape beside his eye. "I owe it to him to figure that much out."

"I wouldn't have figured you for the owing type," Jim said bluntly. He wasn't particularly interested in making friends. If the guy could help then that was good. If he couldn't then it didn't matter and besides, after not contacting Gil for over a decade owing him things seemed a bit rich.

"I pulled him out of early retirement after Lecter." Jack stepped back a little, a slight motion, still looking at Gil. "I thought he'd be all right. I mean, who's really burnt out at that young? Just one last case, and I promised him I'd keep the guy away from him. He'd just be looking at the scenes and the evidence, and then he went to see Lecter in jail to get the feel of it again, and everything went to hell for Will again. Did what I could to help him pick up the pieces after Molly left, but..." He gave a shrug. "It never felt like enough. I crashed his little sea-side paradise."

That was a lot of making up to do. Holding the responsibility for screwing up someone's life was a tough thing. He had Ellie, he'd not just screwed but been responsible for Holly's death. Yeah he knew what that felt like.

Part of Jim sympathized and the other part wanted to put Jack in Gil's place and consider he deserved it.

"Right." He looked at the other man not saying anything else but knowing that his feelings would
come across loud and clear. At least it would if he had earned his job title.

There was something in Jack's eyes, a dark edge, and then it slipped away like a shadow while he nodded. "Right. I can't do much for him here. I'll see you around, Captain Brass."

"Sure thing," Brass waved diffidently. "I'll tell Gil you came down, Agent Crawford." In among the long discussion they were going to have about the gap in Gil's life.

Really long discussion. Jesus, he didn't even know where to start, but Crawford was nodding at him and heading for the door. "Thanks."

No sniping last words. He just left, like he knew he wasn't going to be able to draw any blood there with Brass.

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Even though she had a warrant, Catherine felt oddly like she was breaking into Grissom's place. It seemed eerie and silent even though she had a key and had on occasion fed Grissom's bugs while he had been at conferences. She reminded herself to do that before she left.

The warrant was general and gave her a lot of leeway in searching for information that might pertain to Lecter or Millander and she was careful as she moved around. It was amazing how fast they moved when Lecter's name came up. She could understand why. There hadn't been a force yet that he hadn't humiliated, devastated and left in ruins behind him. Just as no one wanted him there, everyone wanted to be the ones to bag him.

Their best shot at that lay somewhere in the mysteries of Gil's past. Catherine wasn't entirely sure how she felt about all these revelations. A little hurt maybe that he hadn't shared. She thought they had something different. Honesty between them that rarely existed between a man and a woman and she felt a little disappointed that she hadn't been trusted enough to know. But in the same breath she could understand why. From things that Jack Crawford had said she realized he was protecting people and had spent all this time not going any further than a few dates protecting them all.

It seemed pretty petty to get upset about not knowing when that was what was at stake. She looked around. She knew most of Grissom's lay out. His study area, his relaxation area. If he was going to have secrets he would store them somewhere more private. His bedroom most likely.

He occasionally allowed people into his house, but Catherine could guess it had been a while since someone had been into his bedroom, and in times of dry spells... Catherine had let coffee cups and magazines build up in a way that wasn't exactly alluring since she and Eddie had started divorce proceedings.

Hell, Gil even kept the door closed when the house was locked down. Bingo, and it opened under her careful, latex gloved hand.

His bedroom didn't look too far off from what she'd been expecting. Door at the end of the tiny hall on the second floor of his townhouse-thing, that spilled out into a bedroom that looked like it hadn't been used recently. The bed wasn't made, but the sheets still smelled like some unscented detergent -- that crisp hard to place clean smell that she associated with Gil. The nightstand had three journals stacked on top of it, and an empty water glass.

So, no obvious places, but then she didn't see Gil hiding things away so secretly that it was paranoid. Somewhere discrete but accessible. She started checking through the drawers, looking for hints and information. To start with she found a lot of other scribblings. Ideas Grissom obviously had late at night. Diagrams, scribbled workings out in timelines. Sketched pictures of bugs that were actually
rather beautiful in their own way. She hadn't known he had any of his mother's artistic talent. Maybe it was just that he didn't use it.

Maybe he didn't have an urge to or just didn't want to. He was a good writer, and cases kept him busy, so maybe that was where his energy was channeled. Maybe he didn't have what Gil had told her his mother had once called 'the soul of an artist'.

The first little incongruity that struck her was that there was a cookbook in the drawer of the nightstand, wedged in there at the bottom of the top drawer. Gil cooked, when time permitted, and she'd eaten at his apartment a few times or after rough cases.

She flicked through the pages looking for anything that was out of the ordinary. She wasn't even sure what she was looking for exactly but then they had been trained to look for the unexpected. That was something Grissom had taught them. Not to be blinkered by expectation. She recognized some of the recipes.

Some of them were things Gil had made, but not most of them. Most of them had notations beside them, measurements marked out, and as she peered at Gil's scrawls, she could make out organs listed, with question marks. 'Subjects missing', with a list of parts beneath it, scrawled in the margins.

That was odd. Had this been a research book as well? She decided to take it with her just in case and dug a little deeper into the drawer. There was a box file of sorts underneath the debris which she homed in on. That was more like it.

Closed, but sliding the lid off revealed a jumble of papers to her. Most of them were folded over twice or three times, and some of them were sealed in plastic bags that reminded her of evidence bags. She could take them off scene and investigate the box there, or start to sort through them there in his house and work out where to go with them from there.

The office was filled with people coming in asking her things and she decided she would rather have some peace and quiet to start with. Admittedly she would need some of the resources back at the lab for detailed work but she could get a feel for the material. Very carefully she opened the first bag that was there, lifting out the contents. Photos and letter by the looks of it. She glanced over one to scan it for pertinent information.

It didn't... seem very pertinent to the case, not at first glance. There were photographs settled into the bottom edge, and a couple of letters laid out flat within it, and a small jumble of unevenly clipped newspaper articles. It was easy to spread them out carefully on the circular throw rug, and harder not to be a little disturbed by the contents. They were all pictures of people that Catherine couldn't for the life of her place. Maybe the letter would clear it up.

"Dear Will,

It's been a while since I've heard from you, and the news about what's going on in Baltimore made me think of you. Promise me you'll keep being careful -- Adam and I are. Kevin's in England right now, attending a conference. He mentioned to me that he read a paper written by Gil Grissom a few weeks ago, and he said it got him thinking about you. I didn't say anything, just that you're still doing all right. I hope I wasn't lying. Write back to me, Will. I found a few of the old negatives that I took with me and had them developed so you could have copies of the photos. I think you shot that roll. Adam is going through the attic, and if he finds any more, we'll send you copies.

Love, Molly."

Whoever Kevin was, he was better at putting two and two together than she had been. Molly, Kevin,
Adam -- she had no idea who they were. 'Molly' seemed to have a history with Gil and the pictures were... family pictures. Typical family pictures like the ones she had of her Lindsay and Eddie.

Old relationship maybe? And what had happened in Baltimore. There were too many damn gaps for her to fill. The boy... the boy looked a little like Grissom. She was sure of it.

Gil had a son?

Who didn't know him, or hadn't known him in a long time. Maybe he'd known Will Graham but not Gil Grissom, which was just the most fucked up thing. Catherine couldn't ever abandon Lindsey, but there was the suggestion there that maybe Gil had to do that for his son. And there were the photographs, a skinny, pretty blond woman with wild hair holding a toddler at her hip, and a man standing beside her, graying at the temples. There were other pictures, men standing together, someone sitting on the roof of an old El Camino, a crooked shot of a dog, people posing. Friends, proof of a vivid social life that Catherine couldn't imagine Gil having. Most everyone was drinking, and they looked happy.

No pictures of Gil, though. Or Will.

But then if he had been the one taking the pictures that would make sense. The styles of dress dated it back some. Definitely before Vegas. These were treasured and secret though. She had the blindingly clear thought of Gil sitting here alone and just leafing through each one, remembering, wanting and then packing it all away and burying it at the bottom of the box file.

No wonder he was good with Lindsay when they had come in contact. She should have realized that there was experience there. Maybe she had and assumed it was some relationship gone past, or a family member. She just wished he'd trusted her enough to talk about it.

She moved on to more letters, looking for evidence to support her theories and any mention of Lecter.

There wasn't any, though. Letters from Molly were circumspect, full of well wishes and suggestions for him to stay safe and healthy, asking how he was doing, if he was happy. It seemed strange, like she was still fond of him, but. But. No hint of what Gil wrote back to her, but the new clippings started to make sense. The older ones were about a high school baseball team that had a Kevin Lindman, and then clippings of high school honor rolls, a college graduation announcement, a smaller interview with 'local forensic anthropologist'. That was Kevin. Maybe Kevin was the son, and not Adam.

Adam was maybe, a new partner? A husband even. Which would make him Adam Lindman and easier to track. And she should definitely be able to track a forensic anthropologist. Maybe Terri would actually know him? It wasn't as if the field was over populated, much like Grissom and his forensic entomology.

God. Watching a life from afar. No wonder Gil never let his feelings slip. He had too much practice at tying them up and putting them away. All very interesting but not exactly the remit of her warrant unless there was a connection there with Lecter or Millander. She dug deeper, going back to old letters and scanning them.

Still nothing, as long as they were from Molly. But there was a ziplock bag full of folded letters that she hadn't touched yet, and the paper looked like it was of varying ages. She started to put away the remnants of the life Gil was watching from afar, and then moved on to the first, most new-looking letter. There was a seal on the backside, pressed with what could have been a fingerprint, and the way it had been opened, Gil had been careful to preserve the seal.
Catherine opened it careful to preserve evidence as well and her expression shifted as she read him.

Will,

*It's been some time and I find my thoughts have mellowed. There is something about the life I lead now that wipes away pettiness. It is a place that I am suited to and perhaps that has smoothed out some of my paltry desires. I do miss you though, Will, when I remember when we talked. As satisfying as sex with any I have tried, each moment a crystal memory of contentment in finding another mind so attuned with my own.*

*Perhaps then I should not have felt as betrayed as I did when I saw that revelation dawn. Because when all is said and done, is it not ourselves who are the worst traitors?*

*The simple pleasures and contentment are key -- birdsong at dawn, dusk smoothing out shadows, and the gleam of moonlight on blood...*

*A memory we both share, Will. From a different part of our relationship long past. I hope the new you is tolerating the crudeness around you and should you ever tire of your latest mask, I will happily remind you of whom you are.*

Hannibal"

It wasn't what Catherine had expected to read. The letter was fairly recent-looking, the paper hardly aged at all, and... and it was Hannibal Lecter. Gil had a collection of letters from a serial killer, the contents of which... well, that one had read like a love letter. Or something. *When we talked,* and satisfying sex, and shared memories, masks and an offer to remind Gil of who he was. Will. Remind Will, because to Lecter, Gil would be the mask.

There were a lot of reevaluations going on in her head. A lot of questions that needed answering but it proved a solid connection. It was what they would need to officially call in the Feds. Grissom once had a relationship with the most renowned serial killer. Had possibly slept with him. Hell, more than maybe.

She had to admit that would put her off of relationships for life. There was the proverbial sleeping with the enemy, and then there was... really sleeping with the enemy, the man he was supposed to catch. Getting that close to somehow who later proved not to be what they were supposed to be... It was worse than Eddie. But it didn't explain about his son or Molly or anything there.

Maybe reading more letters would start to fill in the pieces, more of the missives from a serial killer on the run.

The next was older and involved a picture. A dark sketched depiction of a man clearly Gil, if a younger version, naked and with half of his abdomen cut open.

The words with it were hardly comforting.

"This is how I remember you but that was meant to be private. You and me. That reporter besmirched that. I hope you appreciated how I wielded my tool to right the balance on that score.

You were trying to use me, Will. I am a sword of Damocles. Yet you keep grasping the blade that cuts you back. Debt and pain for each use. A marriage and family for freedom. Freedom is a sacred right and you always stopped short of bringing the full weight of Justice to bear. Would you do that now, Will? Knowing what I did? Not just to you but to your family. Would you finally aim the gun at my heart, or cut yourself with the double edge sword again?"

Hannibal"
Tool. He'd had a tool, and he'd used it to do... something to a reporter, and something to Will's family. The pieces were vague and she didn't have the context. It was like trying to put a story to a movie that didn't have a soundtrack, no voices, just themes. Catherine could guess that maybe Gil had done neither. Will had done neither, because he was Gil now and seemed whole and safe in Vegas, and Lecter was still a fugitive.

It was starting to make Catherine's head hurt.

But in terms of precedent, there it was. If all the evidence turned up that Millander was there it could be that he or she was a tool as much as the one mentioned in this letter.

She wished she could see the replies. She wanted to know what Gil thought. How he responded to all this. In a bizarre way it reminded her of Eddie. Just when it was really over and he was away, he'd do something. Tug on her life in a good or bad way. Suddenly be right there and absorb her thoughts and feelings and again she'd be sworn off men for some time and...

How many years had this been going on?

The most recent letter was marked June 2000, which was... just a few months earlier. Not long ago, and the oldest one took digging to get to. She checked the date before reading it, but there was no seal on it and the paper was plain, lined. January 1979.

A couple of decade's correspondence with a serial killer. Catherine grimaced and rubbed at her temples. She had the worst headache in the world from all of this and too little sleep. She could understand why he had given up contact with his family if Lecter was attached to him like some parasite and had endangered the people he loved.

"Dammit, Gil, why didn't you say anything?" she murmured under her breath.

Probably so he didn't lose them, too. If she thought about it, what did Gil have? Them and his mother, but he didn't talk about her too often. Probably because she knew him as Will and it would have just been messy crossover if he was juggling things like that. She didn't even read that first letter, but wavered over what she'd have to take to the lab with her.

The Lecter letters. The rest... the rest didn't actually come in within the remit of her warrant or the purpose of the search. That was private and she felt a little guilty for having read it. The Lecter letters established all the connection she needed and were damaging enough in their own way. When Gil was better, they would have a long talk. But for now, she would check there were no more bits of evidence of this kind and take it back. For one thing, Gil had a fairly recent exemplar of one of Lecter's fingerprints. That was worth something. Perhaps there were other clues in there that he could see. Perhaps if he faced the crime scene there would be more there.

It was strange, though, because the almost psychic uncanny accuracy of William Graham when it came to serial killers was not something she associated with Gil. Maybe that was the point. But if he'd had it once, it wasn't going away. Block it off, but it couldn't be destroyed. She didn't want to make Gil face that, but it might mean saving him. And she never wanted to lose him -- they'd come too close this time for her not to be sensitive about it.

What she was doing wasn't about prying. It was about trying to make sure that Gil didn't die on them if there was some grander scheme going on.

Catherine protected her friends.
In movies, the world always ended with a dramatic swell of music. There was a thunderclap of a drum and the strains of a violin sliding into the listener's ears to tell them that danger was imminent that it was time to tell loved ones that you loved them before it all went wrong.

Gil never got that kind of opportunity. He hadn't ever gotten it, but it would have been nice to get more than Jim's vague mention while he'd been on the edge of consciousness that Jack had been by. It almost didn't click, except that it did, and he knew who Jack was and if Jim knew who Jack was then Jim knew who Gil was.

Who Will was. He hadn't pried, though, hadn't had time because there was Detective Lockwood and Nicky with a tape recorder and paper.

Brass was out of the room and Nick looked a little uncomfortable to be in the position of asking his boss some very sensitive question so to start with it was Lockwood who set things going after they had done the preliminaries.

"Can you tell us how you came to be at the warehouse where Paul Millander was living and working?" Lockwood asked even as Nick practically had to shake himself to stop staring at Gil.

It was hard to tell how much of that staring was because of how bad Gil knew he had to look, because of what had happened, or because of what he knew that Gil wasn't sure he knew. "His fingerprint was found on a piece of evidence at a crime-scene. We knew that the molded hand was being used to leave the prints, but we didn't know who had laid down the copy or managed to make a copy of my fingerprints. I was... following a hunch when I went there.

"What hunch exactly?" Cyrus asked even as Nick cleared his throat and looked at him. The presence of Grissom's fingerprint had really thrown them all, even if it were something symbolic.

"When I was first at Millander's workshop, with Detective O'Riley, I picked up a rubber hand and set it down. You could, if you were skilled, lift a print from it." Gil reached for the glass of water that was on the swivel table the nurses had brought in while his 'guests' were there, and took a sip. "I remembered that I'd done that, possibly left a print."

Nick nodded. "You could do that yeah." Gil noticed that the other CSI almost leaned forward to pass the glass to him but managed to hang back. He must look worse than he thought.

"What happened when you got there, Gil?" Lockwood said calmly.

"We... talked. I circled around to the issue, and looked around. He offered me a cup of coffee, and I accepted. Then I asked him if he could find any receipts from the wholesalers he sold to. He left..." And came back with a gun, and from there... From there Gil didn't want to think.

"Grissom, I know this is going to be difficult, but we need to know what happened in detail from that point," Nick said earnestly. "We've got a lot of evidence from the crime scene that's placed. We need to know what was placed and what wasn't. What happened then?"

Then. Then. Gil put his glass down because he didn't need anything to fidget with them watching him like a bug under glass. "He had a gun in hand -- he told me to take off my jacket and place it on the back of a chair. I set my sunglasses on the table at his prodding, and was careful to leave prints on them. Then he walked me up the stairs, gun to my back. He had me undress and removed my gun."

"What did you think he was going to do?" Lockwood asked even as Nick made a note. Gil guessed he had explained or confirmed something with that statement.
"At the time, I thought Millander was going to walk me into the bathroom and kill me in the same way as our other 'suicides'. But he... the decorations in the room made me suspicious. He was hinting at... someone else in that room."

"How was he hinting, Gil?" Nick immediately pounced on that. A little too eager. If he were a suspect, Nick would be giving things away.

"He had a perfectly set table setting for one -- there were decorations in the room that hinted at a different person. A copy of Wound Man and cookbooks. He also mentioned that he was a judge." Gil's memory wasn't giving him information in order -- there were bits and pieces because he kept skipping ahead, to the way that Paul, the way that Millander had leaned into him and fucked him hard, had sucked him off, had made him hurt.

"That Millander was a judge or this other person was?" Nick asked leaning forward a little. "What was significant to you about Wound Man and the cook books?"

"That Millander was a judge. He also... didn't have an adam's apple." Gil had gotten to see that fact close up, and he had to close his eyes for a moment. Nick kept leaning in and that was too close, but he couldn't exactly jerk back. The hospital bed was too small to move in without moving right out of it. "The hints seemed to suggest an old case I'd worked."

"When you were known as William Graham," Lockwood tossed that out as a half challenge. "Isn't that right, Gil?"

Gil looked back at Lockwood, and didn't blink. Didn't look at Nick, either, because there was a snerk of a voice in the back of his mind demanding that someone cue up a drum. "Yes."

"The Hannibal Lecter cases," Nick clarified clearing his throat. It was hard to say who was more uncomfortable. "Millander implied that he might be there?"

"Yes. He wasn't, but that was the implication. Millander said he was doing it on purpose." He wasn't sure which was worse -- that topic, or the fact that Nick leaned in further and his knee nudged Gil's catheter bag, and the look on his face when he glanced down and saw it hooked just inside of the bars on that side of the bed.

"Sorry, man," Nick said and sat back.

"How exactly did you get to be on the bed, Gil?" Lockwood continued.

"He circled around me with the gun once I was undressed and hit me with it. When I came to, I was already tied down."

"We need you to tell us what he did, and anything you can remember that he said," Lockwood persisted. "And whether you thought there was a connection with Lecter."

"I've... had a truce with Hannibal. It wasn't him. Millander claimed he was doing it to get his attention. I was... a side movement in something he was planning." Collateral damage, but that was what he'd always been. Everything was collateral damage, it happened because it was convenient to happen to him. His family didn't have to be the third family, he didn't have to be hurt like that by Hannibal, but. But.

But. He didn't want to talk about what Millander had done. He knew, logically, that he had to. It was part of the case. But they knew him. "When I came to, he... talked to me. Tried to convince me that I could have chosen to be there. He tried to calm me down, and then performed oral sex."
Nick was looking at him then, and he could see that particular flex of a jaw muscle the younger man got when he was desperately trying to control emotion. He just wasn't sure which emotion it was. "Did he give reasons why he... assaulted you like that?" Lockwood said calmly. He was good, Gil had to admit that. Most detectives would have been very uncomfortable by that admission.

"He told me it had to be done, and that the fact that he'd... enjoy it was a bonus. He said he wanted to..." Gil had to stretch his memory to grasp it properly, and probably didn't remember it right. "Mark Lecter's territory to draw him out. After that he... went for it."

"Went for it?" Lockwood asked and Nick cleared his throat.

"The medical report showed sexual assault..." he supplied and Lockwood frowned a little at him.

"I have to hear that from Gil, Nick."

Gil didn't particularly want to say it. It was getting harder to keep that distanced tone of voice, not to feel the lack of distance from the event. He still hurt. His wrists, his ankles still hurt. "He..." Fucked? Raped? Performed an act of intercourse? What were they expecting Gil Grissom, the guy who never went on dates, to say? They were both watching him, and it made Gil want to close his eyes and pretend he'd passed out, except neither of them would buy it. No one would buy it and it was childish of him to even entertain it.

"He didn't have to untie me when he fucked me. And he didn't use any lubrication. It went on for... a long time, and he eventually masturbated me to..." Gil waved a hand a little, a vague circle of motion. "When he finished, he assaulted me with the gun a little. Then there was the sound of a car outside. That was when he knocked me out again."

"You were unconscious during the time that CSI Willows was present looking for you?" Lockwood pushed at the topic a little. "You had no opportunity to call for help?"

"None. I think I yelled, but she probably wasn't even out of her car. When I woke up, it was dark outside."

"You were unconscious for a reasonable period of time," Lockwood concluded. "What were your first impressions when you regained consciousness?"

"That I was still breathing. I hoped that he hadn't killed whoever had come to investigate." Gil had to close his eyes for a moment, because it was getting hard to look everywhere but them. "He had a linoleum knife."

"Is that significant?" Lockwood asked. "That particular type of knife?"

He could tell from the look in Nick's eyes, they knew the answer. He'd forgotten how much of taking statements was getting the witness to say what you already knew.

He'd been doing the damn job for too long.

"It was what Lecter used on me when I attempted to capture him." Come up to him, knocked him into a bookcase, twisted his hand until bones had ground, until he had no muscle control of his wrist and had to drop his gun. And then he'd stuck the blade in, twisted it, jerked and ripped a hole in him. It was supposed to have been gentle, but that had been a lie. Even with Hannibal whispering to him, he'd had to fight it.

"Again a connection. Did he say anything else at that point?" Lockwood asked even as Gil felt Nick looking towards his stomach and the scars old and all too new.
Gil had no idea what they looked like. Didn't want to know, because he was probably going to have to live with it. "He heavily suggested that I try to survive it. That was after he spent ten minutes carving... whatever he did into me." Ten minutes of struggle and agony and Millander kneeling on his crotch.

"Did you remain conscious?" Lockwood asked. "Did you hear him say anything else?"

"I remained conscious. He wasn't... saying anything. He was trying to keep me still." There was no way to describe to them the agony he'd been in, the threats that had hardly worked to keep him still. Threatening to cut off a ball and make him eat it had hardly dented the pain, but it had made him bite at his lip again.

"And then he just stopped?" Lockwood made that a direct question. "And didn't finish the job?"

"What do you mean 'finish the job'?" Gil could only assume he meant 'kill him', but clearly he hadn't. He couldn't have been telling them the evidence if they'd killed him.

"Do you believe his intent was to kill you and he failed, or to leave you alive?" Lockwood asked plainly.

"His intent was to leave me alive -- whether I was still alive when I was found was another matter," Gil shrugged, the motion tight. He slid a glance over to Nick, to gauge what he was thinking. Nick had obviously been thinking it had been too close a deal. He could read that all over his face.

"Well that covers the events. It's your show now, Stokes. CSI stuff," Lockwood said gesturing to Nick.

"This isn't really part of the statement as such, Gil, so it's just for your thoughts. You've got more background on this than any of us but if you want to stop just say," Nick said almost apologetically. "Millander's DNA came back XX and high androgenous hormones. We've matched to an exemplar from his family home with his mother. There were a lot of details in there -- the current theory is that Lecter was puppeting Millander. Everything seems to point that way. Agent Crawford seems confident now that's the case."

"Agent Crawford can go fuck himself. And you can tell him that," Gil offered bluntly. He needed to sit up a little more, and pressed his hand against the side rail to get a little leverage. Everything still hurt. "Lecter isn't involved. Yet."

Nick looked uncomfortable. "Griss, the evidence ties the assault to Millander, but it's not his usual MO. There was salad, with fava beans, Chianti and an excised portion of... your flesh in a blood sauce. There was a fake desert baked out of human fecal matter with some human DNA in it. Greg is still trying to pull the information out of that... You think he wants Lecter involved?"

"Yes. He said it would serve the higher cause of justice." Gil shrugged again, and reached for the glass of water. "And I wouldn't call it a sauce. There wasn't any cooking involved. He cut it out of me and dropped it on a plate."

Nick winced at that where he didn't. "So you think he has some sort of plan? Couldn't that be a double bluff? Agent Crawford has been telling us some of what Lecter can do..."

"And I am telling you that it's not Lecter. I'm sure that Jack's told you all more than you ever needed to hear." It was getting hard not to snarl that, and he managed to keep his voice down because he was sipping at water. "Jack's a two-faced bastard."

Jack was probably in the other room, and Nick hadn't ever heard Gil call anyone a bastard.
"Easy, Gil," Nick patted at an unbandaged part of his arm. "Easy. We shouldn't trust him?"

"Trust him if you want. But whatever happens to you is not my fault if you do trust him." He could tell that Jack was already doing it, ingratiating himself into their lives, getting to know them, telling them things. Old war stories -- he was probably headhunting as much as he was trying to work the case.

"We're your team, Grissom. Always will be." The way Nick said it with the sort of sincerity only he could muster was heartening if a little naive. "We're more likely to trust you. Besides..." He smiled slowly. "He insulted Greg. Assumed he was a loser because of his hair."

That got a little laugh out of Gil and he looked down for a moment, mollified. "Jack... is very close to being one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, Nicky. When he shows up, trouble is usually on his heels." And ruin, but Gil wasn't going to say that. Maybe they didn't know that every time Jack pulled a rabbit out of a hat, Gil lost everything. His footing, his sense of self, his family.

Nick nodded. "Like Lecter. Got it." He glanced at his watch. "Brass said if we pissed you off too much before he got back he'd make sure we all regretted it. If it makes you feel better, he seems to have taken an instant dislike to Agent Crawford."

That was good to hear, too, better than hearing that he'd pissed off Greg. Gil nodded, and sat back a little, abandoning the water glass to the tray for the moment. "Is there anything else I can answer?"

"I think Cath's coming in sometime," Nick replied as he glanced over at Detective Lockwood. "She said to let you know she had some things to talk about, but we're done for now."

"All right. If you need anything clarified, I'll do my best to help." He wanted Millander caught. He wanted that man to go to jail for the murder he'd committed, for the trap he'd set up for Gil. They would catch him and maybe the bait wouldn't be taken. Maybe they could catch him and everything could return to normal for Gil.

Pipe dreams, but he still had them.

"Thanks." Nick stood as did Lockwood. "You want me to bring anything when I come to see you?" he asked as he tucked his notepad and the tape recorder away. As they did so, the door open and Jim poked his head in.

"You guys done?"

"Yeah, we're done."

"No, I think I have all of the distraction I can handle right now. Thanks." He gave a nod to detective Lockwood, and a half-smile to Nick, and tried not to think too hard about what the topic of conversation was going to be with Jim as long as Gil was coherent and awake.

He watched as Nick nodded and clapped Jim on the shoulder as they left the room and his replacement visitor came over and sat down.

"How was it? Do I need to kick their combined ass?"

"No. I'm glad it was Lockwood." He was a good detective, a good cop. No pressing for anything unnecessary, and while he hadn't wanted to say anything that he'd had to say out loud, it was necessary for the statement. He needed to at least vaguely describe what happened. And that wasn't anyone's fault.
He cleared his throat a little. "So..."

"So with any luck you won't have to do that again in a hurry," Brass replied settling down next to him. "I hear the doctors are doing your surgery soon?"

"Later today or tomorrow. Depending on the schedule." They didn't seem to be in a rush to do it, probably because Gil had been sleeping for long stretches of time when the pain killers allowed it. He couldn't remember the last time that a week had flown by like that, when time had last warped so drastically and a few hours felt like minutes.

Jim had at least shaved sometime in the past day or so.

"I'll find out. Might even go to work, then I'll have something interesting to talk about when you come around," Jim replied with a faint smile. "Crawford wants to come in and see you again." Yeah, there was no doubt from the way Jim's voice changed when he said that, that he knew and he wasn't impressed with Jack at all.

They hadn't talked about it much. It seemed that everyone knew and didn't know how to approach him, and that was fine. Gil didn't know how to approach it, either. "Jim... about that. I, uh..."

Jim looked at him a moment and seemed to realize that Gil was trying to apologize or something. "Hey, it doesn't worry me. Unless you expect me to remember to call you Will all the time or something, because I've got a lot of experience with Gil and Grissom. That could be a problem."

"That's... not going to happen. I ran into an old friend a few years ago, and he called me Will. I told him Will was dead. That... stopped that." He liked Alan Bloom, now more than before because he could respect his professional life more than he had as Will. Gil leaned his head back on the pillow, watching Jim. "I never expected anyone to find out."

"Stuff has a way of coming out. I don't think it will really bother anyone. Everyone's pretty in awe, I guess," Brass shrugged with a smile which seemed to indicate he couldn't see why they were, it was just Gil here.

Just Gil. Just Gil, except he was faintly aware of stirrings in the back of his mind, thoughts that he didn't touch clawing out of his subconscious looking for air, space to breath and stretch and move. "They shouldn't be."

After all, William Graham was a legend and a burnout. There was no reason for the legend to overshadow the burnout part of the story, and Gil had worked hard since then to avoid doing that to himself again.

When had Jim moved that close? Had he drifted off, or?

The feeling of a large warm hand taking his hand grounding him got him focused. "Yeah, I said that, but they don't listen to me. In fact, I don't think they ever did, you know that? Amazing." Jim shook his head. "There's things that you don't know about me. About any of us pretty much. I know the guy who I've worked with for ten years." He shrugged again. "Catherine looked a bit shocked, though."

"Catherine's leading the case?" Catherine had been in his house, and that meant that Catherine had wandered in between his butterflies on the walls -- a voice in the back of his mind peered up and whispered about the symbolism of Becoming, and was he already there or had he Become? -- and she'd probably found his secrets, some of them if not all of them.

She probably hadn't pried up the floorboard in his closet. It was a small comfort that he was going to
wear as soft and warm as the spot that Jim kept rubbing over the skin between thumb and forefinger.

"Yeah." Jim looked down a moment and then back at him. "So we pretty much know about your family and what happened with Lecter. Most of it anyway. What the FBI knows, at least." It was easy to underestimate Jim. He could just slide something like that into conversation.

That there were things the FBI didn't know. And maybe they had pried up the floorboard. Maybe his sanctuary wasn't so safe, so sacrosanct after all, and maybe he was going to have to guess what they knew. Could he just ask outright, or would it be better to beat around the bush? Gil opened his mouth, but closed it when he saw a familiar face pass by the door. Jack was pacing past.

Jim looked like he had just sucked on a lemon. "You know, that guy makes my knuckles itch," he said conversationally and looking hopeful that he might just keep walking past.

And maybe he would -- except that Gil knew, Will knew, that he wouldn't. "He wants Agent Starling back. That's why he's here. He wants me, Will, to hunt Lecter down for him so he can get his agent back." And Gil shouldn't have known about it, except he had letters and correspondence, and enough passing knowledge of news to know that Lecter had her and that she was still alive.

Gil closed his eyes. "Just... tell him he can come in. So he'll leave."

"You sure?" Jim asked him again still holding on to his hand. "I can tell him where to go if you want."

Jim would tell Jack to go to hell, but Molly had served as that counterpoint for years for Will and it hadn't ever worked. Jack got in, got under Will's skin and he'd do it again. "No, that's... it's better to get it over with." He gave a squeeze of Jim's fingers. Gil hadn't even had time to ask Jim why he was there, why he was warming the chair beside Gil's bed, holding his hand, almost always there whether Gil was awake or asleep.

"Okay then." Jim got up and went over to the door and he could hear him tell Jack something like he might as well come in if he was going to pace around. No false promises of Gil wanting to see him.

There was no doubt it was what Jack had been waiting for -- he was inside the room like a shot even as Jim very deliberately returned to his normal chair and settled down.

"Hi, Will. It's been a long time."

"Not long enough." Jack hadn't aged well, but the last time Gil had seen him had been, what, ten years ago? When Lecter had first escaped, when Will had been visiting his mother and he'd been hauled in for questioning because there was an off chance that he'd seen or aided or abetted the psychopath that they had let loose.

He remembered spitting at Jack.

"And I thought it might be long enough for you to let go of some of this," Jack replied shaking his head sadly. "I just wanted to see how you are recovering. We did used to be partners, Will."

"Yeah, Jack, I remember it well. Did you expect to drop by and reminisce? Hey, remember this case or that case?" He shook his head a little, and frowned at Jack as the other man walked closer to his bed. "I'm recovering."

"I'm here because one of your CSIs called me," Jack replied and Gil recognized his attempted at innocence. "I'm here because they need help."
He could feel that Jim had taken his hand again. Could feel the pressure of thumb wearing at that familiar spot again. "That's fine." He wasn't going to buy it, wasn't going to believe it, but Jack had to know that already. "How's the case going?"

"I have to admit, they've collected a lot of evidence," Jack replied with one of smiles he remembered so well. "Though DNA is dragging their heels. I still think we could get a result quicker if we used the FBI labs..."

"The cooked sample," Jim murmured. "Greg's been working on it."

"We're the second best lab in the country. You couldn't get it done faster without shipping it to the east coast, and we both know it, Jack." Gil shifted, sitting up a little more. Maybe he was hallucinating, but he remembered a similar tableau from years ago, Jack standing off to the side like some all knowing fatherly figure, surveying the damage wrought on Will, a hand holding tight to his that ended up still not being enough to ground him.

"So they tell me." Jack cleared his throat. "We're going to need you on this one. Lecter's involved, that's for sure Will and no one else has ever come close and stayed clear."

"Lecter," Gil stated calmly, "is not involved. No matter how much you wish he was, Jack, he's not involved. Yet."

"What do you mean by that?" Jack came closer to the bed. "The attack had all his signatures all over it. It's not like he hasn't done this sort of thing to you before."

"Once, Jack, because you pushed me into the god-damned case!" Because he'd tried to use Lecter to get the scent and he had the scent now when he didn't need it, didn't want it. "Millander said he was doing it to bait Lecter. This is something going on between them, or... Millander wants something going on between them." His head was starting to hurt and he lifted his free hand to rub at the temple that didn't have stitches running right beside it, covering his eyes for a moment. "I don't know."

"So a serial killer wanting to hook up with another serial killer," Jack said. "That's a recipe for disaster right there. And using you as bait. You absolutely sure about this, Will?"

"There are better times to do this sort of thing, Jack," Jim said with heavy emphasis.

"You told me to come in. I came in. I've only got Will's best interest at heart."

The room was stunned to silence by the audacity of that pronouncement. Or at least, Gil was, and Jim might've been taking his cues to heart. "Jack... You have your best interests at heart. You have the Bureau's best interests at heart. Not Will's. Will's dead and you did a lot of the killing there, so why don't you just... just stop pretending. If I have to, I'll do it, just not now. I can't."

"If Lecter comes back, Will, it won't just be you in danger, you know that. And who knows what this Millander guy has in mind. This is a hell of a mess and we can't afford to wait..."

Jim stood up suddenly. "Agent Crawford, with your head so far up your ass, you might have just missed the line you shouldn't have crossed. I think you should go now."

"We... can't afford to wait?" Gil sat up as much as he could. "Fuck you, Jack. I can't even stand up right now without help. I'm lucky that I'm alive."

"Yeah and I want to keep you that way," Jack said earnestly. "You know it's true, Will, and I..."

Brass had grabbed hold of his arm. "Outside. Now."
"We haven't finished discussing..."

"I think Gil lost interest in what you were discussing about... when you last fucked him over?" Jim suggested pleasantly enough. "Don't make me hit you, Agent Crawford. Think of the paperwork."

"Hey, look, you don't understand the ramifications of this, Captain Brass. Jesus, Will, call off the guard dog."

"He's a friend, not a guard dog. I just gave you my answer, Jack. I need time. Go away -- go do your damn job yourself." Was it so hard to leave him alone? He was still in the fucking hospital, he was still processing his bodily functions through bags and everything still hurt and he still was trying not to think about what had happened. There wasn't enough room in his head for Gil, let alone anyone else.

Brass didn't wait for an answer but very impolitely moved Jack from the room. Gil could see some rather vigorous words being exchanged; Crawford probably doing his 'end of the world is nigh!' speech and Jim from the looks of it rather succinctly telling him to fuck off if his lip reading was up to par. There was a gesturing that firmly put any responsibility for what happened next on them not Jack before the Agent turned and left, radiating anger.

Jim returned with a broad smile. "Woof fucking woof," he said with a smirk.

"Thanks." Gil leaned back, peering at Jim again, watching him move to sit down in the chair again. "That went as well as I could expect. I'm sorry."

"Yeah, you should be. It was only because of you I didn't punch him in the face. I mean, you might disapprove or something," Jim said still smiling. "You need rest, you need not to be thinking about this shit now. That's why we spent all that time training other people to think, y'know?"

"I wish that he wasn't right. This... if it gets Lecter's attention, this is... going to blow up in our faces, potentially." A bomb that Gil hadn't set, but that he was. He was what could blow up, so to speak. If Hannibal arrived, under the radar, and no one but Gil knew, they could pass through the storm unharmed. But with a full CSI investigation and the FBI involved, and Jack there...

"Yeah, I get that," Brass murmured. "So if he does, we'll deal. We know he's dangerous. We know Millander is. We've all had close calls. But if you stick your neck out you make it certain, right? If you're the only guy in the world that can take down Lecter then I'd pretty much want you fit and healthy before I pushed things. You don't send a prizefighter into a championship fight if they've been hospitalized. Simple practical common sense. Unless I'm missing something here."

"The only thing you're missing is that Jack is missing an agent. And he wants her back," Gil murmured. "No common sense needed. When I was in the Bureau, they just... got me up to functioning and that was good enough." And he was functioning, wasn't he? Head mostly clear, but his body a wreck, and that was better than stretching and reaching and trying to get better because he knew they needed him when he couldn't make things go faster. "This is... just physical damage to Jack. He doesn't see why I can't start to work the case now, from the bed."

"Well he's an idiot," Brass said succinctly. "We know you. You're the most committed guy I know. When you're ready to work on it then you will and if you aren't ready then you shouldn't be because it could cause problems with the case. Simple."

Simple, except that it wasn't, and his head was really starting to hurt. "Yeah." He wanted to sleep, to rest and forget that anything had gone wrong, and to forget why he was there. Eventually he'd have to stand up in front of a mirror and see what Millander had done to him, but he was avoiding that for
as long as possible. "Jim, do you mind if I ask something?"

"Sure. You can ask me anything," Jim replied easily enough.

"I don't mind that you're here. I... don't like to be alone in hospitals. But I keep wondering... why you're here." There. He hadn't asked anything strange, hadn't asked anything about what they knew or didn't know. This was something simple, something between him and Jim and that never got too complicated.

Jim shrugged and gave a simple if surprising answer. "Because I want to be here." It was an answer that was just like the other man. It could be a very simple phrase or it could be a signpost to something deeper.

That easy. Gil nodded, and scooted down a little in the bed. "Okay. Is there anyone else lurking out in the hall?"

"Nah. You can have a sleep if you want," Jim replied settling back. "Giving statements can be tiring, right?"

"They went easy on me," Gil noted. He pulled at the sheets with his free hand, noting that it didn't bother him that Jim was keeping his right hand hostage. He didn't need it much just then anyway.

"Good. They've got enough to get them started," Jim murmured stroking his hand unself-consciously. "I'll have to go back to work soon, but the guys are coming in to see you. Want to save that time off for when you get home and you really need it."

If he hadn't been so tired, so sharply drained from Jim's visit, it might have startled him more, what Jim was suggesting. "What're you going to do with it?"

"Stay with you. Or you stay with me," Jim shrugged. "It's then you'll need help, right?"

It sounded so obvious when Jim said it.

"Probably." Gil closed his eyes, fingers twitching almost desperately to remind himself that he had the contact of the other man's fingers. Not alone. Not alone, and it was Jim. And when he woke up it was going to be Catherine or Warrick or Sara or Nicky. "Hasn't caught up with me yet."

"It always does. But later, right? Lots of time for that later," Jim murmured to him even as the details of the room became indistinct again.

Jim was right and he could wait a little longer if there was someone there. It was when he was alone that his mind turned in on itself. Maybe if he wasn't alone he wouldn't have to go through the inevitable breakdown. Maybe not.

Catherine knew she looked like hell -- Sara had pointed it out to her, which was galling beyond belief, but she still look good compared to Grissom. The bruising had faded and the swelling had gone down a lot, but he had been in recovery for his reverse colostomy for the best part of a day and no one looked good after an operation.

They were a good way into the case and she found the details running around her head constantly. She was already regretting contacting Crawford, even if it had been necessary. He was trying to poach Sara, he'd managed to offend Greg, and Jim hated him, and had told her about Grissom...

And the headache had taken up permanent residence. No wonder Grissom got migraines. All of
those things on the sidelines to balance, and if Jack had been as abrasive ten years ago, it was little wonder that Grissom had tried to assault the man in California, and had ended up with a saliva sample in CODIS.

There was a good chance that with his background, she would have tried to spit on Jack, too, no matter how out of character it was for the Gil they knew.

Gil was propped up in a hospital bed looking desperately groggy and trying to do a crossword puzzle at the same time. It was Warrick's idea to leave him a big book of them, varying levels of hardness.

"Hey, Gil," she smiled as she stepped into the room. "Up to another visitor?"

"Does my visitor know a five letter word for hat?" He sounded groggy, and the pen was a little loose in his fingers, but he seemed lucid.

That was a start. She couldn't exactly talk to him if he was incoherent.

"Fedor?" Catherine suggested as she walked over and bent over to give him a light kiss. "I thought you were just out of recovery?"

"Isn't it fedora?" He blinked his eyes a little, and looked at her with a little curiosity in his eyes. "I am. Didn't want the other painkillers. Hurts, but..." He shrugged. Okay, so Gil was starting to refuse pain medication?

"Fedor's six letters but I think you can use Fedor as well," Catherine said sitting down. "If you're hurting, you need painkillers, Gil. You have just had surgery."

"I'm tired of sleeping." He wrote 'Fedor' down in pen, and frowned at the page for a moment before he laid the pen between the pages and closed the book. "How're you?"

She opened her mouth trying to work out how to answer that. Did Gil need to know about the fact she hadn't been able to sleep properly since it all happened? That she felt driven and constantly at fault? Probably not. "I'm fine. Missing you," she managed.

"You look tired." He had a relatively soft surface behind him to lean against, and seemed comfortable, even if his expression was a little tight. "Killed Jack yet?"

"No. But only because we can't spare a CSI to investigate it," Catherine said with a smile. "He's trying to poach out Sara, would you believe that?"

"Yeah." Gil shifted, turned a little towards her, and it couldn't have been comfortable for him. Or maybe he was still so drugged up that it was. "He does that. He likes a certain personality type."

"Well, looks like I piss him off even more than Brass did. I refused to hand over the evidence I collected at your house, Gil." There. She'd admitted it. One of the things preying on her mind.

"Is my house a crime scene?" It seemed to surprise him, a little.

"No. No, I was given a warrant to search for evidence that might prove a possible connection to Lecter. It was me or the Feds. I... decided to do it personally." She was hoping she didn't have to spell it all out. "I found the letters and pictures."

No reaction, and maybe his lack of a reaction was a reaction. "Ah. It's not as if any of that's a secret to Jack, Catherine. He'll tell you more if you hold still long enough."
"I didn't take your... family pictures and letters. They weren't in the remit of the warrant." She exhaled. "I guess I feel a little weird about having to do that. I wanted to apologize."

"That's all right. I should have... expected it to come out some time." He cleared his throat a little. "So you took just the ones from Hannibal. I, uh..."

She recognized that look. That was the Grissom look of 'oh shit I don't know what to say or do'. It was curiously reassuring.

"I suppose I could tiptoe around the edges, but that's not my way," Catherine said. "So... I guess I was a bit hurt that you never said anything. I mean I understand why you did, I just wished I'd been a good enough friend that we could've shared that."

"The part where I used to have a family? Or about Lecter? Or that I haven't always lived in a 'hermetically sealed condo'..." Gil sighed, and looked down to the book in his lap, "Doing hard crossword puzzles."

"Any of it. I've always liked the fact we could say anything to each other," Catherine replied gently. "I mean it would have been good to have someone to talk to about it sometime right? So, was it just something about me?"

"No. I..." Gil kept looking down, mouth a little open. "No idea where to start. I ran away from my life, Catherine. Well. It ran away from me, and I just couldn't... couldn't handle that. I wanted to start over." And when he finally looked over at her, it was with a firm gaze that unsettled her a little. "You can't start over if you let it follow you. And what was I supposed to say? 'Did you know I burnt out at Quantico when I was twenty five'? Or, if you've read the letters, and I can guess you have, 'I used to sleep with a serial killer'. That's a great conversation topic. Really. How about 'I cheated on my wife'? And 'she cheated on me'? And 'I haven't seen my son since he was nine'?"

Catherine looked at him a moment. "Yeah, that would have worked. That's the point. You've been something different to me. I know we've never gone to a relationship or anything because I think that would have been too ordinary. I guess, I just wanted you to know I could've coped with that. After all, you coped with the ex-stripper with the abusive husband, right? I know it's not as big a deal but... Hell, I don't know what I'm trying to say, Griss. I think I can understand a lot of it and I'm sure as hell not going to judge you for anything. I've got no right to do any of that."

"I, it's not... that I was keeping anything. You were living that life, you were still you, and I... Will's dead. I can't drag that with me all the time. I can't think about it all the time. I can't think when it's all there, Catherine. I can't be that person; I don't have the energy to do that." He rubbed at his face for a moment, trying not to look at her. "Will's dead and I wish everyone would just leave him buried."

"Jesus Gil, I'm sorry," Catherine felt an immediate stab of guilt as she reached for his hand. "I'm so sorry... I really am. I'm sorry because I know this is my fault. What happened to you is my fault..."

"It's not. I went in there, I had a hunch, and then I knew, and tried to... ignore that I knew he was the killer. And he saw that I knew. If I'd run for the door when he left to get the receipts..." Gil let her grasp at his hand, and shrugged a little, a tight gesture that made her hurt. "It's not your fault."

And implicitly, it was his fault, and Catherine didn't know what to think about that.

"It doesn't change the fact I was there and he snowed me... I knew something was wrong, otherwise I wouldn't have followed you there. But he fooled me and I didn't put it together until it was too late," Catherine replied holding him tight. "It wasn't your fault. He had a gun on you. There was nothing you could have done. I could have done something. I should have gone with my feeling and
acted then. Hell, Gil, I was planning how to tease you about it!"

The edge of his mouth twitched a little, a faint motion that faded too fast. "He made it seem consenting. I didn't know my love life was so barren that it's up for jokes..." There was another shrug -- by now, Gil was using it like a punctuation mark, something to say with a gesture when the words failed him. His voice was starting to sound shaky. "I thought he was going to kill you. If he hadn't fooled you, he would have."

"I would have shot him," Catherine said with certainty. "Rather than leave you there. I just can't stand the thought of knowing what he did and that I could've stopped it. I could have stopped this pain for you." It was true, that was a fact she couldn't get away from. "I don't expect you to forgive me for that, so I've been trying to... do what has to be done. For you."

"By the time you got there, Catherine... He'd already had most of his fun finished. Wouldn't have made much of a difference."

And that was worse in a way because she needed desperately to have been able change this somehow. She was so damn tired as well that it nearly brought tears to her eyes. "Anything he did to you is a big difference to me," she said fervently. "To all of us."

"I'm... starting to realize that," he said, voice falling quieter. Catherine wanted to kick him if he'd somehow never thought that before. "Have you... worked out what he carved on me? I haven't seen it yet."

"Nicky's piecing it together. It's... we think it's a dragon Gil. We're not sure what that means," Catherine replied, stroking at his hand. How could he not know? Or was it that he hoped they didn't? Because everyone who'd cared in his life, from what she could see, had turned on him or left. And if a person associated love with that person leaving, then... Why hope for love and worry at all?

"A Dragon...?" She could see Gil tilt his head a little, looking at some indeterminable point on the sheets near his feet. "In blood. A bloody Dragon. Blood... blood is red." He sucked in a breath, and then started to laugh in a strained sound. "Red Dragon."

"That means something?" Catherine asked, concerned. It obviously did, something from his past so must be something to do with Lecter. "What is it?"

"The Red Dragon... It was the... Jesus, the Dollarhyde case. The Toothfairy case. He had a tattoo of Blake's Red Dragon... And he was Becoming." There was still a strained laugh in his voice, and he leaned back again, closing his eyes. "He did his research. Millander did his damn research."

"Becoming?" Catherine definitely needed that clarified. "What's Becoming?"

"It's a... transformational state some killers go through." Gil shook his head a little, and sighed. "They become something else through their crime. God or the devil or a beautiful woman or wanted and desired. It's..." It didn't quite click for Catherine. She needed to think it over, whereas Gil -- or was it Will? -- understood it implicitly.

"Right. Right. I think I need to think on this. But this was a Dollarhyde thing? This is another link?" Catherine asked looking at him. "Or some sort of way of... uh... transforming you?"

"I don't know." He still hadn't opened his eyes, and Gil shook his head now. "I haven't seen it. It's... I can't be sure unless I'm working the case. And I'm... not. I am the case."

"It's okay. We can work on it. You don't have to do anything. No matter what Crawford says." She
meant that. They might get there slower, but they would get there.

Eventually. Maybe. "If Lecter shows up, I'll have to. I, I don't have a choice. He moves too fast, he's too dangerous if Jack... if Jack doesn't go back."

"Trust me, we're trying to get him to go. It's my fault, I shouldn't have contacted him, but I needed information," Catherine grimaced. "I'm sorry, Gil."

"I've been at a truce with him," Gil said, and Catherine couldn't quite grasp that idea. "I leave him alone. If I, if I..."

If I, and Gil's voice seemed to stick like he couldn't complete the thought.

"Shh, shh... Gil, it's okay. It's okay. Look, none of us are going to leave you to face this alone," she said trying to reassure him. "You know we'd do anything for you okay? You do know that right? If not, start learning it."

He squeezed her fingers. "I keep thinking I should leave. But I think Jim might hunt me down to beat sense into me."

She smiled at that. "Yeah he would. He really would. I've never seen him like this." She debated whether to say anything else. Or should she let them find their own way?

After all, she'd already mused on Gil's love life, and look where it had gotten her and him. Sitting there in the hospital, with Gil looking tense and sad and tired and wound up all at once. His free hand was knotting in the sheets, book resting on his lap. "He's worried. He'd do it for you."

"He'd do it for you, you mean," Catherine replied. A nudge wouldn't harm, not in the right direction. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do this to you Gil. I... I guess I'm not thinking straight either."

"It's a lot to digest. I..." He exhaled, and finally peered at her a little. His right eye still seemed swollen, but that could have been the stitches that were right beside it. "I'm scared."

"It would be pretty stupid just to say everything is going to be okay just like that huh?" Catherine said looking right at him, feeling her eyes sting a little at that pronouncement. "All I can say is that I will do anything I can to make sure nothing else happens to you. I can promise you my best Gil. And if anyone wants you, they'll have to go through me and a whole group of people first."

"That's what I'm scared of, Catherine."

"Let us be your friends, Gil, okay? We're not the FBI, we're more like a family," Catherine murmured.

"And they left. He tried to kill them, and they left. And that's..." Gil muffled a yawn that cracked his jaw, un-knotting his hand from the bedding. "What scares me."

"We'll work something out," Catherine murmured. "You need more rest. I love you, you idiot, you know that? Last thing we need is you getting an infection or something."

"Mmm. They want to release me in a couple more days..." Which was a great chance for him to catch an infection all by himself, except Jim was already planning to take what time off of work that he could. They weren't going to leave Gil out on his own after that and they weren't... she wasn't going to give him a chance to cut his ties and run when they weren't looking. She could see the urge in his eyes earlier.
If nothing else, she knew what would happen and she didn't have the heart to bring it up. She might not understand the intricacies of the psychopathic mind, but she knew basic plays, and if Millander or Lecter wanted him back, they would go after the team. It would be better if they were all ready and prepared for that. "Yeah, I know that. And you'll have Jim there. You want him to stay at yours with you? Or you want to go to his? I can get the place ready for you."

"I don't want to go back to my place," Gil murmured. He seemed to be sliding towards sleep, towards rest at last, even if his body was full of tension.

"Jim's then. I'll let him know." She stroked his forehead gently. "Go to sleep, Gil."

"Be careful..." He seemed to calm a little, though, and even as ragged and beaten-up as he looked, a peace seemed to settle over his face. It wasn't immediate, but Gil eventually started to breathe slower, mouth a little lax. The crossword puzzle book was still resting on his lap, and Catherine set it aside. She felt a little better for their discussion but knew her feeling of guilt wasn't just going to vanish because Gil said so. It wouldn't be that easy. Gil had managed decades of penance for taking responsibility for danger to his family so she decided there and then there would have to be something more tangible, more solid to be the act of forgiveness.

They had to stop Millander and Lecter. For Gil's sake, and for the sake of them all.

Catherine just didn't know where to start.

Bandages served the strangest purpose.

They were there to keep infection out, Gil knew, but they served a dual purpose of keeping everything else in. Skin under bandages went soft and white from lack of air, wounds puckered and skin shed. It was all a very scientific process, very predictable. Stitches served the same keep-in keep-out purpose, sealing a hole but keeping whatever was in when it was sealed in and the outside out.

Gil just wondered how much of that was rot, because he was covered in bandages and stitches. They doctors had told him to expect them to start falling out soon, the stitches beside his eye and up over his temple, the stitches on some of his lighter cuts. He'd have to come back in a week to get the stitches for the deeper wounds removed, and... And he wasn't going to think about the deep, thick chunk of flesh that had been cut out of his chest, where the knife had nicked his ribcage. There had been surgery to seal that, and his doctor had mentioned muscle damage.

His doctor also kept expressing surprise at how well Gil was doing, but that was because the stitches and bandages kept the rot in him, kept it from getting out.

He knew he was falling apart inside, but the wounds were healing so well, and he didn't want to end up like he had last time. Like he had every time. Will had given up, had fallen apart, but Gil... Gil was damn well going to soldier on. He'd ignore that most of the Band-Aids that had been slapped down over his IV holes, over his medication port, itched.

He was going home soon -- back with Jim, who was busy finishing work so he could take vacation time. That meant he had someone else on duty of being his bedside companion. Jim had been true to his word there; there had been very few times in his stay at the hospital where he had been conscious and alone.

It was just a little difficult that the person on this final watch was Sara. She was too curious to let things go, and too blind to emotion to see how raw he was getting inside.
"...and possibly I could become a full agent if I wanted to. Specialize you know? Anyway I don't have to give an answer or anything -- he's been called away for a few days."

And what was he supposed to say to that? Thank god? Was he supposed to think logically and tell her why he thought it was a bad idea, or why half an hour of her happy talk about a new possible future was making him ill?

"Sara..." Gil had a small stack of books and other things that people had brought him while he'd been there. He was still in a hospital gown, but Jim had said he was going to take the house key that Gil had given him and get him clothes, pack up an overnight bag to last a few days. "If this... I wouldn't suggest taking Jack's offer."

She looked at him. "Well, I can understand you having a problem working with the FBI again," she said with a hint of sympathy. "Considering what's happened, but I like the idea of being involved in forensics research. Developing new techniques. I thought you were all for finding new ways around things?"

"Sara, it's Jack Crawford who's recruiting you. He's the head of Behavioral Sciences -- he doesn't deal with forensics. He's looking for someone who's willing to take risks in the field for him and is young enough to survive it." A hint of sympathy didn't matter at all if it wasn't tempered with common sense and she needed to think with her head and not with her heart this time.

"I know he's not the most approachable guy but..." Sara had a faint flush to her cheeks and Gil knew what that meant. Crawford had been wooing her. Dinners, conversations, paying attention and Sara had been lapping it up.

That was partly his fault.

Maybe he should have left her in San Francisco. Maybe he shouldn't have called her in to do the IA on Warrick. Maybe... "No, Sara. Jack can be very... friendly when he wants to be. He likes to hand-pick the agents who work for him. He's had four agents under his wing since he was senior enough to do it -- Andrews was shot by a suspect and died on the scene. Then there was me, Andrew's successor, and my track record wasn't..." Gil exhaled, and shifted to sit up a little more. "Wasn't the best. Cunningham also died in a confrontation with a suspect, and Starling is MIA. Do you see a pattern here, Sara?"

"Yes," Sara admitted. "I know the history of it. It's just that it's an opportunity to get in and skip over years worth of climbing ranks. That's a pretty big offer and it would make a difference. If it weren't Jack I'm sure you would be interested in a practical field level forensics development post."

"But it is Jack, Sara. You shouldn't trust him with your life." Gil looked at her, her eager expression, the tilt of her mouth. "And you just arrived in Vegas a couple of months ago."

"I know. I don't have roots yet," Sara smiled a little. "But I don't want to leave before we crack all this. Then... then we might see." She wanted him to say something. Lure him out with this talk -- Sara wasn't stupid.

Gil just wished he could see where she was trying to go with it. He also wished that he'd argued his way out of a dose of painkillers, but the nurses were getting sly to his arguments. They'd had over a week to hone their skills, and Gil had to admit that they were good at it by then. So it made him muzzy and his mind drifted when he wanted to think sharply instead.

"We'll see. Promise me you'll think about it. I don't want you in that kind of danger."
She smiled at that. "And I don't want you in here either." She looked around as the door opened and Jim came in with a small bag.

"Ready to leave, Gil?" he asked gesturing with the bag. "Got some things to change into."

"Thanks." He was already close to the edge of the bed, with the railing already swung down, but now he could stand up, half-careful not to flash Sara while he got to unsteady feet. Everything hurt more when he was standing, an ache in his guts that seemed to echo up and entangle with the pain of his chest

"Slowly there," Jim almost pushed Sara to one side to come around to steady him and she looked at him with an incredulous expression on his face and then straight at Gil.

Except everything hurt until he managed to get on his feet and standing. "I'm okay. I'm not going to fall over." Jim had his arm up by the shoulder, near the bandages beneath his hospital gown. He turned a little, and belatedly remembered that his gown was open at the back. "They wouldn't let me leave if I were going to do that, would they?"

"And I wouldn't put it past you to pull the wool over their eyes," Jim replied. "Sara, could you pass the bag? I found some loose looking pants and a t-shirt."

There was a pause, and then Gil was half aware that Sara passed Jim the bag before Jim rummaged through it. Gil zoned out a little, missed a few motions but otherwise was still paying attention when Jim pulled a Grateful Dead t-shirt out of the bag.

"You sure you didn't get that mixed up with Greg's locker, Brass?" Sara asked looking at the garment in surprise.

"Definitely his," Jim said with a teasing smirk. "Found it in his drawers, unless you and Greg have some explaining to do."

"It's an old shirt," Gil excused, eyeing it while Jim held it and then eyeing Jim. "Why don't you hand me it and my pants and I'll walk to the bathroom and change there."

"Sure." Jim passed the items over and then said, "Just call if you need help, okay?"

Sara was still giving the homicide cop a strange look. And it still didn't make sense to Gil, but he tucked his clothes under his arm, clutched tight to them, and started to make the treacherous three foot journey to the bathroom door.

It was a relief to close the door behind him, even if it left him a little at a loss for what to do next. Presumably changing was part of the deal, but if he sat and did nothing, he could hear Sara and Brass talking.

"That's pretty insensitive thing to do, to make jokes about him being gay after he's been raped," Sara was muttering in a low voice. "For gods' sake, Brass... like his masculinity isn't threatened enough."

"Sara, I hate to break it to you but Gil likes to travel the highways and byways of sexual exploration, you know?" Jim replied in a low voice. "I thought you knew that."

"You telling me Gil is gay?" Sara's voice rose a little.

"More sort of bi, I think. But if you're one of the people who defines being gay as ever having slept with the same sex then yeah. He is."
Huh. Gil shrugged off the hospital gown, and turned his t-shirt around so he could pull it over his head. That was a conversation he'd never planned on having with Sara, but Jim had saved him the trouble of having to ever have it.

After all, it wasn't as if there was much that he drew the line at. Male or female, and Sara should have known that. There was that... tension that had started when he'd taken a half a year sabbatical to teach in California, and had continued when they'd started to meet at conferences.

"How do you know?"

There was a silence where Gil could imagine Jim making his 'Come on, don't be stupid' face and then Sara clearing her throat.

"So that's why he's going back to your place is it?"

Not as far as Gil had known, it wasn't. He was going there because he didn't want to go back to his apartment -- partially because everything was there, all of the artifacts and pieces he didn't want to deal with, even if the Lecter-related things were in the lab in evidence, and partially because he didn't want to be immediately found.

If it came to that. Gil hoped it wouldn't come to that. Even as he quietly struggled to keep his balance while he pulled on boxers and then the loose sweatpants Jim had grabbed. So what if he was leaving a hospital in his pajamas.

"He's coming back to my place because he needs a friend," Jim replied. "Okay? I know Gil, have for years. I..."

"But you didn't know he was William Graham," Sara pointed out triumphantly.

He heard Jim sigh. "That's because he isn't. The sooner all of you let that go the better for him and for you. Gil Grissom is who he is now, okay? What's the big deal about not knowing? None of us know anything about anyone until we meet them."

"But he didn't tell you. He didn't tell any of us!"

"And you didn't tell him about your childhood and none of you know for example that I was drafted. Yeah. We've all got bits of our lives like that, Sara. Stop making it into a bigger deal than it is."

Sara went quiet, and Gil wondered how long he'd been leaning against the bathroom sink with one leg in his pants. Jim had been drafted? It made Gil pause for a minute in his head, stopped his thoughts long enough for him to get his pants on properly.

Probably the lack of knowledge about each other was what kept the propagation of the human species going, he decided.

"I didn't know that," Sara was saying then. "I thought you were always in the force."

"Yeah well who knew huh? Secrets are usually there for a reason. In my experience, at least." Jim cleared his throat and said in a louder voice. "You okay in there, Gil?"

"Yeah. Just... a little off balance." Inside and out, but there was plenty of things he could lean on and catch himself on in there, and he'd step out soon. Once he was sure that the two of them weren't circling each other for a kill.

"I'll pack your things up out here. Sara can give me a hand." Jim called back “They’ll be up with a
wheelchair in a minute."

"Good." Good because he was tired, and a glance in the mirror proved that he looked as tired as he felt. He looked like hell. No, no -- he looked like Will, which was almost the same thing, and it made Gil want to laugh a little before he pulled himself together enough to think about taking care of any last minute business in there before he went outside.

He wasn't going to miss that catheter.

By the time he got out there he was worn out, Jim had packed up all his gifts and books and the hospital orderly was standing waiting for him with the wheelchair. Sara was giving him very strange looks.

"Let's get you home then, Gil," Jim said with a smile and not even a hint of the conversation he had just had.

After all. Home wasn't a place so much as a place where the people were.

"Why don't you sit down, Mr. Grissom. I think your friend here is going to go around and get his car...?" The nurse's aide was saying that like a heavy suggestion, and it made Gil smile a little, a bare twitch of a gesture.

Jim quirked a smile at him. "See you downstairs, Gil. Sara can escort you out."

He watched the pair of them exchange a look and Sara nodded slowly. "Of course."

And the only difference as they moved through the hospital to freedom was she inexplicably didn't talk about the FBI any more.

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Gil had started it -- or maybe it had been Brass, or both of them. But the idea of impromptu-ly and officially going over evidence in the break room after a long shift was good for the team. People could drink coffee and ruminate over papers and talk loudly, argue if they needed to, without worrying about sneezing or spilling something on the evidence.

Which Catherine wished there were more of. There just wasn't enough, and she wasn't sure what she needed to share with the team about the Lecter-notes that she'd recovered from Gil's house. Were they relevant? Irrelevant?

"Right... so we've dealt with the DB in the drain. Nice one, guys," she said looking at Warrick and Nick. "And Sara's unknown mystery guy, so we're back to the Millander case. We're coming to a bit of a standstill and it's still the Sheriff's favorite topic of conversation. And the news as well. Let's go over what we have and haven't got, okay?"

"What we haven't got is a motive," Sara started. "Not for Millander, and most of the evidence points to Lecter, despite Griss--despite witness testimony to the contrary."

"Uh, yeah, about that?" Greg squirmed in his chair a little, and pulled a few sheets of paper out of the folder he was holding. "I managed to find a piece of DNA from the uh 'pudding' that I could run, from the flesh? It's XX, and it's a match to all of the other XX we had on the scene."

"You got a sample out of that?" Catherine was astonished. She'd been assured that the FBI with all their equipment had written that off as "impossible".

"Hey, way to go Greg," Warrick drawled. "So... Millander's flesh was cooked in that dessert? What
"Right. So..." Greg shrugged his shoulders a little. "I mean, how could a guy be already dead on a crime-scene that he hadn't yet had time to commit?"

"That's our job to figure out," Nick said, taking the files from Greg. "Not that I have a clue where to start. How does a guy go from being digested to being up and walking around and attacking people?"

Catherine felt the ever present headache ratchet up a notch or two. What would Grissom say? He'd say they were assuming something. "Well we've got two scenarios. One is Lecter has assumed the identity of Millander and consumed him, and secondly... consumption of flesh does not mean someone is dead."

"No, but it would imply a willingness, cooperation if Millander was willing to let someone eat part of him." Sara's eyebrows scrunched together for a moment. "It could be significant of some kind of pact between the two of them -- Millander and whoever his partner is. Cannibalism is very symbolic."


Catherine nodded. It was a good point, and worthy of consideration. "So Lecter contacted Millander or vice versa and they made some sort of alliance with Grissom as the target?"

"It's possible. I just wonder why they didn't... finish him off. Griss said that Millander wanted him to survive, even if he didn't go out on a limb to assure it. If this is some big drawn out game for them, then -- or maybe a warning?" Nick offered with their possible theories. But there was no evidence. Motive was so hard to prove even with evidence.

"It's possible that it was Lecter that wanted him to survive," Catherine said and cleared her throat. "I discovered evidence that implied Lecter was possessive about Gil." Possessive was a better word than anything else that leapt to mind.

"Possessive how?" Warrick asked. "Possessive enough to nearly kill him? Didn't he try to kill him before?"

"Yes." Catherine admitted, "And his family."

"So..." That was Sara jumping into the fray again, still looking thoughtful. "If that's the case than this would be, what? Territory marking, or? Against who?"

"Man, I'd rather have a dog pee on my shoes any day," Greg muttered.

"It is possible that it's a challenge," Catherine agreed. "Grissom seemed to think so, though I'm not sure how that works. It looks more like a copy-cat and that would be more a case of obsession?"

"Last thing we need is an apprentice serial killer," Warrick said. "Two Lecters running around?" He shook his head.

"Griss was pretty adamant that it wasn't Lecter. I'm not sure whether he was saying that it wasn't his style or what, but he flat out denied any possibility that it was Lecter working through Millander. He said Millander was doing it to get to Lecter and that there was something going on between them. He wasn't sure."
Of course, Gil would know Hannibal's style best, intimate or torture and murder. But even when Catherine had talked with him, his words were heavy on implication and light on outright statements.

"I hate to say it, but we're getting to a point where we might need his help to work out what is Lecter and what isn't. A lot of the evidence appears to be him, but then Millander is an expert in faking up crime scenes," Catherine said. "Our evidence is leading us to a dead end though I know there has to be some meaning in it. I'm more inclined to believe Grissom's judgment over the FBI viewpoint that Millander is a puppet. The reason being that he's had a more recent correspondence with Lecter than they have."

"Wait -- recent correspondence?" Sara leaned forwards against the table, clutching at her coffee cup. "How do you know? How recent?"

"Lecter sends Grissom letters. I was given a warrant to search his house for the originals and... there's one from this year," Catherine admitted. "And the tone isn't aggressive in any respect. Quite the opposite."

"What's it sound like? Can we see them so we can figure out what's going on?" Sara kept pressing.

"So... Gil writes to him? Or Lecter writes to Griss? That's... wow, that's fucked up," Greg exhaled. "Wow. Isn't that kind of a Stockholm syndrome thing going on?"

"Sounds like it," Warrick agreed. "And this has been going on all the time?"

Catherine nodded. "The letters are part of the case and as we've exhausted every other avenue..."

Fuck, she had no choice.

"We'll have to look at it."

Nick was the only one who didn't look fascinated by the idea. He was looking at the others and then down into his mug, and then back at Catherine. "Shouldn't we be trying to figure out where Millander went? I just... I don't know what pertinence those letters are going to have to the case if Lecter's not the one committing the crime."

"You're right, we should be, but we have nothing on that except the information from Mrs. Mason and his mother," Catherine replied. "We don't have any other type of evidence pointing to what he might be doing. He took out a significant withdrawal in cash just after the attack and vanished. No credit card trace, no report of sightings. Even his wife can't think of anywhere particular, but then she didn't know about the warehouse." Nick was right but they didn't have any evidence leads that way. "If you want to look into that, Nick, if you can find a handle on it... go for it."

"I... yeah. I'd rather try for that angle for a while." At least until another case came up and she put him on it.

Sara sat back in her chair, nodding even as Nick said that. "I want to see those letters."

"Then you'll have to liaise with our friendly neighborhood FBI Agent as they have them at the moment," Catherine said. "Warrick, you can help Nick. I want to be sure we're not missing something on that angle."

"What about Grissom?" Warrick asked leaning back in his chair.

"I don't want to bother him. Not until we have no other choice." And not even then if she could help it. She just hoped Brass was looking after him.
That was why Jim had taken all of that time off, after all, so he could look after Grissom, so he could make sure he rested and healed and was... all right. As all right as he could come out of what had happened.

In a way it was their chance to prove the team. No Brass, no Grissom, just whatever they could achieve themselves. As little or as much as that was.

"Right. Nick, you want to look over our favorite transsexual's dual lives with me?" Warrick pushed his chair back, and started to stand.

"My idea of a fun time," Nick replied with a slow smile. "C'mon, Greggo, we could use your eyes on this if the lab is slow."

Catherine had to try and hide a smile at that; Greg would get things done in half the time so he could help out. Sara wanting to know, that worried her. She couldn't be sure of motive.

Morose interest or her own urge to know more about Gil, to understand the puzzle. Catherine didn't want to tell her that it wouldn't help -- that she'd gone over them all by then, and Gil made no more sense half the time now than he had before. If anything, his sanity was what baffled her now.

By her reckoning, any normal person would be wrapped in a strait-jacket and bouncing off of padded walls. In fact there were other victims who were doing that.

It was just as well Gil had never been ordinary. By any stretch of the imagination.

And for all she knew it was his... mindset, the very things that had made the FBI peg him for unstable in the first place that had kept him afloat. Gil had always had a skewed, funny way of looking at the world, and she knew he'd never lift a hand to anyone without provocation. And sometimes not even then. He liked to fight with words and law and... And Catherine's head was hurting. Sara gave her a funny look, and finally left Catherine alone in the break room.

She needed not to make things worse. She'd hurt Gil with their brief conversation but she'd also made promises to Grissom. And if keeping him safe involved getting a tracker or something off of the Feds and planting it on him, she'd do that.

But before she waded into it all again, she was going to the shooting range and make sure she was as good as she remembered. Because she had a feeling she would need to be.

Jim had known Gil would crash out the moment they reached his place -- even the short journey had been very wearing. So he'd put Gil on the couch, watched him fall asleep within the space of ten seconds or so, and carried on tidying up a little. Not that his place was untidy. It was generally clean as well, which would have surprised a lot of people, but Jim had been living alone for some time. In the end, a guy made things as easy for himself as possible.

His place was split level with a large living room area that blended into the kitchenette, a small downstairs guest room that he usually used as a computer room and the bathroom and up the stairs was his own pretty sizeable bedroom. Needless to say he'd spent time clearing out the computer room though it always had a bed in it in case he ever got Ellie to return his calls and come over some time. He hadn't heard from her in a long time.

He'd probably never hear from her until it was too late. That was the way of things, and maybe not even then. But he was prepared and... And, well, he could put Gil up in the guest room. When he woke up from what looked like a pretty heavy sleep on the sofa. Jim had dragged a light blanket from the closet and draped it over Gil. If he was going to be that easy a person to care for the next
two weeks, Jim figured he was going to be pretty bored.

Not that it mattered. He was just going to be around. There would be a point when Gil would fall apart and though he wasn't good at jigsaw puzzles, he knew how to pick up the pieces.

He looked at the diet sheet that he had stuck to the fridge door of things Grissom should avoid and tried to think of what was in his food supplies that would work. Soup maybe. Or they could order out something easy like Chinese. Rice was okay. Fatty foods weren't. Simple things.

Easy to digest things, and Jim didn't want to think about that. Didn't want to think, but it still crept into his mind when he gave his fridge one last look-over and finally grabbed a beer to tide him over until whenever Gil woke up. There were saltines if Gil wanted to munch on something while Jim cooked, whenever that happened, but there wasn't much point in making a meal if Gil wasn't going to come around for another eight hours.

Gil needed simple foods because some bastard -- a bastard who didn't even have a natural dick -- had raped Gil that badly. A man's ass was sacrosanct, no matter what kind of sex they liked. Hell, a woman's ass was the same, but Gil wasn't a woman. Gil was... Gil. And Jim had had that ass, had been there even if he didn't remember it too clearly, and that was maybe what made it so strange.

Cath talked about their theory of Lecter's possessiveness and he hated the fact that he could see a small part of himself in that theory. He had no doubt that if Lecter or Millander crossed his path he might conveniently forget procedure and just shoot the bastards. Or bitch. And he wouldn't feel a moment of guilt or remorse about it.

Catherine shouldn't have been telling him details but he got the impression she needed to speak to someone. This whole thing was taking a toll, and cleverly applied make-up could only cover so much. He cracked open the beer and took a swig. It had been a long time since his brush with too much drinking.

That wasn't what he was doing. He could drink... in a controlled way now, he guessed. A couple of beers a week at the most, a couple of drinks with friends at the most. And that sort of counted as a drink with a friend if he was sitting across from Gil in a Lazy boy recliner that had seen better days. Never mind that Gil was asleep, one arm hugging his pillow like the world was going to end.

He was going to have to think about security of sorts. He knew for a fact elaborately planned security never helped. It just made people over confident and less alert. It was best to be ready for something unexpected. Fight like he had been jumped on the streets. Fight hard, and dirty and not worry about the rules. So all the precautions he had when he used to be in the field more at New Jersey were back. Second weapon, a blade of sorts, the penknife on his key ring. Simple things, but effective. Sometimes people overthought things.

The best security system he'd ever paid money for had been one on his front door that made an insanely loud whooping noise. He could try another one of those -- it was thirty bucks well invested, because if someone was taking the time to pry up a window to kill him, then he was probably more fucked than any speedy response to an alarm system could manage for him. But doors... doors were another story. And so was just carrying more weapons. Simple as that.

"Nngn."

"Gil?" He turned to look to see if Grissom were waking up. It didn't exactly seem like it. "You awake?"

No answer, except Gil turned his head, pressing his face into the pillow in a way that had to be
uncomfortable for his neck and his back, twisted up and facing the back of the sofa.

Maybe he ought to wake him, or at least push him over to a position where he didn't look like he was going to suffocate himself. He pushed himself up and bent over him. "Gil? If you don't wake up I'm just going to move you over a bit, okay?"

There was a twitch in his shoulder muscles, and he curled in on himself a little more. Yeah, he was going to smoother himself on couch cushions, and if Jim let that happen, Catherine would smother him. With a high heel, somehow. Somehow.

He reached down, touched Grissom's shoulder and was taken by surprise as fists started flailing at him immediately. He was so surprised the first one cracked him in the eye with an impressive sounding thud.

Jesus that hurt, but Gil had twisted towards him so fast, lashed out so fast that Jim barely missed the edge of the coffee table when he stumbled back and fell on his ass. It was a damn good thing he hadn't had his beer bottle in hand when he'd done that little investigation. And even with him not there, Gil was still getting punches out, twisting and thrashing in a way that couldn't be good for him.

He'd rip his damn stitches out if he carried on like that, and then Catherine would definitely kill him. In his care for all of a couple of hours and Grissom would end up back in the hospital. Well, if he arm-locked him around the upper arms, he'd miss most of the scars and stop the thrashing. If he could get behind him that would mean Grissom had less chance of kneeing him in the groin.

All that consideration took a fraction of a second and he was up and moving and clamping Grissom's arms from behind so he could hold the pressure away from his chest. It was a messy attempt at restraining as he usually didn't have to be careful doing it. "Easy, Gil, easy... settle down. Easy..."

It didn't work well, but Gil's legs got caught up in the blanket, and slowly, the longer Jim just held on, the less he fought, the less he even tried to kick or swing a fist out. Jim gentled his hands down to Gil's elbows, glad he'd gotten Gil sort-of on his side on all of that. It left him a way to soothe Gil towards calm, or try to. He was making noises, and his hands were in front of him, and Jim had to lean over his shoulder to see what he was doing. There was a faint whine escaping Gil's throat, and he had a hand wrapped around -- oh, fuck. One of his wrists that was still raw in spots and scabbed here and there.

"Shit. No, Griss, come here..." Jim exhaled as he reached round to intercept and pry off the hand that was trying to apparently break his own wrist. He was more solid, tougher than Gil but when the grip latched onto him it was enough to make him wince. "Wake up, Gil... C'mon, yeah." What the hell, his hands were a bit tied up so he sat down half pulling him onto him so he could stop him moving around so much.

Gil clutched at him for a minute with that hand, the motion too tight and too-strong, but then it started to fade a little, falter, and he could hear Gil suck in a shaky hitch of breath. Maybe he was awake now or asleep again in a quiet way.

Well if this was the way things were going to go, there was no way that Grissom could sleep on his own. So much for the spare room. He might have to move the bed upstairs or something. He could hurt himself way too easily. "You awake, Griss?"

There was another funny, too-awake breath, and he could feel Gil shift from sleeping tense to a more awake tense. He opened his eyes, the edges of them looking damp while he tried to focus on Jim. It was almost enough of a response for Jim to forget that his own head was ringing and his eye hurt like hell.
"Hey. Rough nap, huh?" he said at a loss how to fill the silence, even as he released his grip.

Gil's voice was a low rasp of sound, and now he was staring at Jim's face. "Yeah. What... Your eye?"

"It's nothing. Had worse trying to get the last donut. Vega gets serious about sugar, you know that?"
Jim replied in a low voice. It was very nearly true as well.

"No, I..." Gil was talking without thinking, but Jim could see things catching up in his mind, enough to see that he was sitting upright, almost in Jim's lap, and that Jim had a black eye, and who knew what else was going through his head. Jim barely caught sight of Gil's bruised wrist, fresh bruises already blooming red and angry, before Gil was to his feet and lurching for Jim's kitchen sink.

Okay, so maybe this was going to be a challenging couple of weeks after all. "Whoa, whoa, Gil..." He had to move fast to try and catch up with him. By the time he did, he was heaving into the sink. "It's okay... What can I do, huh?"

Other than be glad that his sink was stainless steel with a garbage disposal. He could get water for Gil, or flat ginger ale and some crackers. Something to get the taste out of his mouth. Ice or something for his wrist, and maybe ice for his own eye.

"I, I hit you..."

"Yeah?" He really couldn't see what the problem was. He got thumped and battered on practically a daily basis. It wasn't like he had good looks to worry about. "Well I guess everyone should try it once right? You want a drink? Let me get you something. Water or ginger ale -- doctors said to steer clear of juices at the moment. Too acidic or something."

Gil managed a nod, and it looked like he was going to gag again, just for a moment before he got it under control, head hung down between his shoulders. "Sorry..."

Jim patted his back gently. "Let me get you ice for that wrist, yeah?" He opened the fridge and got some of the ginger ale, and extracted some ice cubes and wrapped them in a clean dishcloth. "Drink that a minute and I'll get some uh... crackers or something. you want that?"

"Sure." Gil just kept standing there, unnervingly leaning against the edge of the sink like it was all that was holding him up, eyes closed tight. "I'm sorry about this... I..."

Jim looked at him. "No need to be sorry, Gil. C'mon, we'll sit and talk. I'm no shrink but that's a good thing right?" He passed over the ice in the cloth. "For your wrist. I'll borrow it in a minute."

"Use, uh... Frozen peas. Vegetables. It works better." Gil turned a little, and grasped onto the ice, staring at Jim while he did so.

"Good point," Jim said rummaging around for his frozen peas. He then got the crackers out and tipped some on a plate and got out the butter. "Here we go."

He decided to munch on one himself even as he looked back. "You okay?"

"No?" Gil was still leaning against the counter's edge, and he wouldn't quite meet Jim's eyes. "I hit you." Sure he'd hit Jim, but it wasn't that big of a deal -- for Jim.

"So?" Jim looked at him again. "Was a pretty poor hit to be honest. Not even sure I'd call it a punch. More of a tap." He half smiled at him. "What's the problem?"
"I... I don't hit people, Jim. Not you, not... anyone. I..." He clutched his fingers over the hand towel full of ice cubes, crushing it down over his wrist. "I can't think."

"Now that's the last thing anyone can accuse you of," Jim replied having to try and steer him over to the couch. "Go easy on that, will you? Look, Grissom, I get hit, battered and bruised pretty much every day on the job. Sometimes before I even make it out the front door. An accidental swipe isn't anything to get worried about. You didn't mean it."

He'd been asleep. How could Gil mean it if he'd been asleep, and more logically, how could Gil think that Jim would think he meant it if he'd been asleep when he'd done it. "I thought..." Something. Gil trailed off, and Jim got him to sit down on the couch again.

"You thought I was someone else?" Jim supplied even as he fetched over the ginger ale, crackers and frozen peas. "Well, when you've got your eyes closed I'm guessing that's a pretty normal thing. Who was I impersonating, Millander or Lecter?"

He didn't want to think about that much himself, but there was something ghosting over Gil's eyes as he picked up the peas and offered the package to Jim instead. "I'll stick to the ice-pack. You use these. You... weren't either."

"Well that's good, because I think I'm much better looking," Jim said automatically as he took the peas and pressed it to his rapidly swelling eye. "I'm lousy at impersonations. Sometimes I have problem impersonating myself. So what was the deal?"

He sat down close to Gil and leaned back, still totally at ease with him that close. And if Gil had a problem with it, he didn't say anything. Jim wasn't sure if he should've pressed it like that or not, but Gil seemed to be moving again, reaching for a cracker. "Nightmare."

"Well, that changes things a bit," Jim said thoughtfully as his face numbed off. How was he going to move the bed upstairs? Maybe he could put the mattress up there and he'd sleep on that and Gil could get some decent sleep in his bed. That would work. He could out-argue Gil about that, easy. Even if Gil looked at him sideways for a moment, and then exhaled slowly. "Does it?"

"Yeah. I'll have to take the mattress upstairs into my room. You were on your way to hurting yourself then," Jim said easily enough. "I'll take the mattress, you take the bed. That way if you have another I can hear you. I sleep pretty light."

"I don't sleep well," Gil shrugged a little. He was still chewing on his cracker, and Jim could see that slowly, slowly, his breathing was slowing down. That was good. "Unless I'm exhausted."

Figured. Jim took away the bag of peas from his eye. "So you'll be okay with me sleeping in the same room right?"

Jim knew he wasn't the subtle type. He was crafty, and clever in a street way but he didn't over analyze. He just cut through things. And maybe that was what Gil needed. Because he looked down at his wrist, well, at the bag of ice, and then he leaned forwards carefully to pick up the glass of ginger ale. "You... don't have to baby-sit me, Jim."

"Yeah I know. But I'm going to." No point denying it. "Because if I took you back to hospital with a broken wrist or pulled stitches Catherine would make sure I had some of my own to worry about. If it's me being in the same room, I promise I won't do anything."
Grissom might be unhappy about that. He wouldn't blame him if that were the case.

"That doesn't bother me. I just..." Gil closed his eyes, like he wanted to avoid the conversation all together. "Everything's a mess and I can't think clearly, Jim. I can't... explain it."

"You don't have to if you don't want to," Jim said simply. "If you wanna talk then that's okay as long as you don't think I'm playing mind games or anything. I don't do that. Besides there's no compulsory thing for you to have to think clearly."

No pressure. That was the idea, a bit of time and no pressure. Maybe the first time Gil had had that in a long time.

"No, he's..." Gil took a slow drink, and Jim had to wait for find out what 'he' was or who he even was. "He's in my head again and I can't stop thinking, and I can't think even though I can't stop."

"He?" Jim had to ask that. "Who's in your head?" This was a worrying development. He was beginning to wonder if he had bitten off more than he could chew.

"Everyone?" Gil gave half a laugh, and lifted his free hand, wet from the face-cloth and ice-cubes idea -- which retrospectively was just going to leave a wet spot on his couch -- and rubbed at his face.

"Well, Gil is the guy speaking to me so..." Jim looked at him and shrugged. "We've just got to make you louder than all of them right?" It probably violated a half dozen rules of psychiatry, but this was his way. Simple, to the point.

"It doesn't help that Jack... Jack's been here. I know what he wants me to do and I can still do it -- I, Lecter's still in my head." And maybe it bothered Jim a little to see Gil's fingers flex a little before he lowered them to his wrist again.

"Jack can get lost. Look, Gil, I'm no psychologist or anything but that doesn't mean I don't know how things work. I did some undercover. Worked with some guys who did undercover and the very best were always walking that line, you know?" Jim bet he did know. "I'm thinking this isn't that much different. You can't get under someone's skin without some of it getting back, right? And I guess what you used to do was like a more extreme version of going undercover. But there's always a way back, especially if you've got someone around to remind you who you are."

There was another look darting over Gil's eyes, and it took Jim a moment to realize that he'd heard Catherine mention a phrase like that being in one of Gil's letters from Lecter. So the muted, faintly disconsolate-sounding, "Sure," wasn't very comforting.

Jim reached and took a cracker. "So what are you most worried about, huh? Not remembering who you are?"

That would've bothered him, personally, except Gil was silent in response. He'd already set down his glass of ginger ale and just didn't have a response.

"You want to know who you are?" Jim took a bite of the cracker. "You're the guy who phones me up on my day off and persuaded me to go up to the body farm with you and then nearly pissed myself when those flesh eating beetles dropped on my head. For your information that was a manly bellow of alarm."

"How can you believe in me when I can't?" Gil's voice was quiet, tight, and he seemed to be struggling to string words together.
"Because I know you. Because day after day, you and I and the rest of the team looked at death together, and that's when you really get to know someone, right? Forget the stuff about what has happened, just remember what happens every time you see some poor bastard dead there and you're alive. Every damn time you mentally pat yourself down and say... hey, I'm still here. They're not. We take it for granted now, I guess. I've seen you do it. You've seen me do it. You don't know things about me, but I still think you know more about me than anyone else I've ever known."

A lot more. Sometimes more than Janice ever had, but... hell. That had been a mess, and when Gil got his head screwed on a little better they could probably swap stories. "I take it for granted... because I'm not all here. Everything's..." Gil sighed. "In pieces and I can't think about it. I tried to explain it to Catherine..."

"You wanna try explaining it to me? I'd give you a beer but you can't have it," Jim asked leaning back and putting an arm around Grissom. It was a buddy thing. They were all a tactile bunch -- well, nearly all of them.

Gil wasn't so much. He swung between tactile and not tactile, but Jim was still a little surprised that Gil shifted, slouched down a little and leaned into him. "I can't function like this. With everything... right there. I can't do it again."

"You don't have to. Anyone tries to make you, I'll live up to my reputation," Jim said in a low voice. So Gil wanted physical contact? Well that had to be a good thing. "Gil, let him earn his damn pay for a change. Let the guys at the lab stretch themselves a bit. Step back a little."

"People are going to end up dead. Because I'm here. It hasn't been like this for so long..." Gil was at an angle that Jim couldn't quite see his face properly, but his voice sounded tired. "I've gotten complacent."

"I could point out that people end up dead anyway," Jim replied looking at him. "So he made you think it was your responsibility, yeah? There's no way anything a serial nutcase does is your fault, Gil."

"I've managed to, to stay off of his radar for so long, Jim. As long as I didn't do anything, as long as..." Gil shivered a little. "I don't know."

Jim found himself pulling him closer as if that would warm him up and help. "Look Gil, I know you don't want to hear this, but if what Catherine tells me is the case, then he was always going to come back at some time. Don't fool yourself that he hasn't been watching you -- I know his type. Maybe I don't know how he thinks, but I know the sort of thing they do. And sooner or later he'd be back to tidy up loose ends."

"I know that, Jim. I know how he works, how he thinks. I know him," Gil reiterated. "I know that he's watched anything that, that got into the media, I know that he's planning how to get back into the country. I'm... territory. Apparently, apparently to be disputed over by two mad-men."

"You're more than that." Jim looked at him. He was frustrated at not being able to put into words what he wanted to say to him. He knew it in his head but knew he didn't have the academic background to logic away all of this. "Look, Gil... when I was training I was put with an experienced cop in Jersey. He used to say if you want to win, don't play the fucker's game. That's what it boils down to."

"I'm just the other side of the coin from Lecter. And I hurt you. That... scares me." Well, it was probably the most damned articulate thing Gil had said since he'd woke up.
"Yeah, but you *are* the other side of the coin. You're not him..." Jim felt he had to get that across.
"So you hurt me. I'm okay with that. I'm a solid guy, built for impact. It wasn't intentional. You think I haven't done my share of flailing around in my sleep?"

"They were going to pull me up for battery charges on Molly for a while there in LA County." Like it was a challenge -- was there some weird subconscious thing going on where he didn't want Jim to be okay with him?

"You did this in your sleep to Molly?" Jim asked. "It's not like you're doing it deliberately. Let me guess, that was the reason you checked yourself in for a stay having your head looked at?"

"No." Another pause stretched out, and Gil didn't move, hardly breathed. Jim was starting to get worried, but Gil finally murmured an answer. "I couldn't handle the thoughts in my head. I couldn't not think like Hannibal. I wanted to die."

"You feel like that now?" Jim asked. Maybe he really should have let someone with a bit more tact and subtlety deal with this. He was afraid now that he was going to fuck this up by saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. And that might finish off Grissom completely.

"I don't know." The pause that followed was shorter before Gil quietly added, "No. I didn't, don't want to die."

"But you can hear him in your head. It's stirred that up again, right?" Jim asked. "So... how did you fix it last time?"

That seemed the logical thing to do.

"Molly helped. She... I don't know. It went away eventually." Gil shook his head a little, still slouched down against Jim. "Jack'd be happy to give you a litany of every, every stupid thing I did in the meantime."

"Look if you're worried about being on your own, don't be," Jim said, absently petting at his hair. "You can stay here as long as you like. That's not a problem. I like having you around."

Which was the honest truth, even if he hadn't contemplated too much that Gil might have mental things to work through that weren't directly related to what Millander had done. Just when he thought he'd been prepared and ready for what he was doing...

Life -- well, Gil -- threw another curveball at him.

"Okay."

He was going to have to get used to the silences, the stretches of time where Gil said nothing, stared at who the hell knew what.

"We'll deal with this. We're good at working through things. You can talk to me about it. I may not have a lot to say but you can still talk," Jim said in a low voice. "This is another puzzle you can solve Gil, and I've never seen one you couldn't put together."

Gil was still silent. He shivered a little, but it didn't stop Jim from stroking his hair just yet. It took him a minute to realize that the shivering was a constant motion.

"You cold?" he asked eventually not knowing what else to say. Asking if he were okay was probably a stupid thing to do so he didn't bother. Gil's hair felt a little like it could stand a washing. It was a little soon to be offering that sort of thing, but he wouldn't mind.
There still wasn't an answer, though, and it was starting to wear at Jim, worry Jim. He leaned a little, pulled back a little so he could look at Gil's face. Gil's shoulders stayed stiff even when Jim drew back a little, and once he could see Gil's face, he could see that he wasn't blinking. Wasn't moving except breathing, and shivering, both of which seemed involuntary.

Okay, this was worrying. "Gil? Gil, can you hear me?" He jostled him a little, feeling a stir of fear. "Gil, c'mon buddy... come back to me here, okay? I know I'm not the best conversationalist but..."

But. His fingers fumbled for a moment to search for Gil's pulse. Not much change -- it was a little faster than 'normal', but Jim had always thought that Gil's lack of a fast pulse was kind of freakish at the best of times.

He was breathing okay, he wasn't going blue and... he was at a loss. He'd seen someone go a bit like this before with shell-shock, once. They hadn't been able to do anything except keep him warm and he came out of it in time to get shipped back home. So. Warm and quiet was probably the thing to do then. The doctors didn't have anything that would do much aside from put him to sleep and it would be better if he could do that on his own.

"I think I need to put you to bed, okay, Gil? This could be interesting considering."

Nothing. He was talking to himself -- that was all right, Jim was pretty damn good at doing just that. He'd moved around to stand in front of Gil, looking at him, trying to figure out how he could approach the task of moving him.

Gil was taller than him but he might just about be able to carry him if he did a fireman's lift. It was either that or wrap covers around him and drag him. He'd try the lift first; it wasn't that far upstairs.

"You realize that if I put my back out doing this we are both in trouble?" he said aloud. Yeah well, then he'd have more time off and it wasn't like Gil didn't need the help. He was part way trying to lift Gil up when he realized he couldn't put him over his shoulder because of his injuries. He'd have to try and carry him dead weight in his arms much like some scene out of a Victorian melodrama.

He was still thinking about the best way to do it -- turning Gil around and dragging him up the stairs backwards or? -- when Gil blinked once.

"Hey, you in there?" Jim peered at him. "Blink once for yes, okay? That's how they do it in the movies, right?"

There was a pause where Jim figured his stupid idea wasn't going to work -- and then Gil blinked in a way that seemed deliberate. Yeah that was how it was done in the movies and apparently in real life, too.

"Well okay. You want me to call a doctor? Or put you to bed?" Jim paused, kicking himself. "Sorry, two questions there. Call a doctor?"

No blinking. Gil didn't blink then, and his eyes darted a little. That could be a 'no', Jim figured.

"So you like the idea of bed right? Being warm? Just resting?" He'd hate to get all the way up there and find out it was a bad idea.

That was a blink, another definite blink. Jesus, he had no idea what was going on, but he could definitely get Gil up the steps and get him in bed. He shouldn't've been sleeping on the couch anyway.

"Right, I'm going to lift you and possibly give myself a hernia, okay? I'll try not to hit you or
anything but..." But he reached his arms under and lifted, groaning at the weight. "You... have to go... on a diet, Grissom."

Jim staggered towards the steps, his back already burning and already doing the mantra of 'just one more step. Just one more' to get him to the stairs and then up one by one.

Gil practically bounced when he let him down on the bed and flopped beside him. "Jesus... I need a heart bypass. That's it, you're staying up here."

There wasn't any motion or blinking in response to that, but Gil was still breathing, and Jim, well, hell, Jim was still breathing, hard. His arms hurt like fuck, his legs were already aching, but Gil was upstairs at least.

Jim wasn't sure he could make a trip downstairs to drag the mattress up.

He pulled himself up. "Let's get you in and comfortable, okay?" He figured it was better to keep on talking as if Gil were there and with him, just silent. He tugged off Gil's shoes and socks, left the pants and top since they looked like they would do as pajama's anyway, managed to get him under the covers -- not as easy as people would think -- and finally asked. "You still cold?"

Jim couldn't just glance at him and wait for a nod. He had to try to pay close attention to his eyes. There was a little darting motion with his eyes, and one more blink. Still cold. Okay, Jim could handle that. He could handle anything because it was him or a hospital again.

So he could get a hot water bottle if he had one, which he didn't because it wasn't the sort of thing a man alone shopped for, or he could get in there with him and warm him up the old way. Body heat. By rights, they should be stuck in a snowdrift or about to die of pneumonia to be pull this stunt, but Jim didn't really care.

"Give me a minute." He hastily changed into something that would do for bed and slipped in with him. It was a little awkward getting into a position where he could hold onto Grissom, look at his eyes if he needed to and be comfortable. He managed two out of the three. Comfort wasn't really important for him "There. Better?"

There was a pause, and Gil blinked again, and this time his eyelids managed to stay half-closed. Good, maybe he could sleep, and when they both woke up, everything would be all right.

If not, he was going to be in a lot of trouble for waiting all night before getting Gil to a hospital. But he was sure it was better this way.

Sureness was all Jim needed.

"You'll like this." He remembered the words, that voice, gentle fingers rubbing, massaging at the small of his back. It had been easy to relax, easy to close his eyes and stretch out, excited and loose and tense all at once. Fingers teasing at the puckered skin of his anus, an amused voice commenting on its color and texture before two fingers delved in, slick with massage oil. It felt good, stretched and tickled, made him hot and eager, made his dick weep against the expensive sheets.

That was usually where the dream-memory took a sharp turn to the surreal reality, towards the feeling of muzzy consent turning to struggling, hard and hot and scared. Because there was a hand up his ass and he couldn't think, couldn't think to scream or protest or do more than bite his bottom lip and thrash his head. Afterwards it had felt like consent again. Afterwards, after he'd come and
there'd been more wine and soft conversation and actions like nothing odd had happened then, like he hadn't been not-asked.

But in dreams, it never worked that way, and there was no calm slow after, there was just that feeling, Him behind him, and then the sudden sharp knowledge that it wasn't a hand, it was a gun.

He felt like he was paralyzed and was trying to struggle. Millander going to do what he threatened, or Lecter. Metal cold against him, wanting to push and he wanted to scream and fight in protest, as hard as he could. Break free and fight because he knew that was something that would never be consent. No blurred lines with the cold steel.

"You'll like this." The voice, voices were blending now, suppressed stammer and familiar coaxing tones sliding together, running circles around the inside of his head and all he could do was let the fear freeze him to stone, let the fingers wrap around his dick, coaxing him to enjoy it even as the raised edge of a sight slipped inside of him. "Oh, you can do this. You just took more than that, come on, Will. This is nothing."

"This is nothing, Will, you can do this. A flash in the pan, and we'll be done and get you home and back to Molly. I promise."

Jack always said that. Jack lied. Every time he lied. He'd gone home to Molly and he'd been a stranger. There was no home to go back to because all of that trust had been broken along with Jack's promises. It was that which made him angry rather than scared, fear starting a slow burn to anger. Fuck Jack. It was easy for him to say, but he never had to be the one that lived in that moment. He always escaped knowing, really knowing. He needed Will Graham because he wouldn't get his hands dirty.

And Will had. Will always got dirty, Will always ended up somehow on his hands and knees, fighting to survive because he took the risks, he made the effort to live, and--

A hand pressed against the small of his back, a shove that muffled a scream inside of his throat. "Will. I'm not losing you, am I? Gil? Gil?" And the gun was there, and now he was being shaken.

"Come on, Gil, I've got you, it's okay..." That was Jim's voice. Jim's solid presence there, so close. Why did he want to be so close? It had been a big sacrifice for Molly to get close enough to touch him. Jim might get attacked too if he stayed so close and he was being held...

He opened his eyes completely disorientated as the scream tried to break free.

It was a struggle to calm down more, to realize that the hands that were pinning his arms to his sides were Jim's, that the forehead pressed against his was Jim and that was why it had been hard to focus, because familiar, tired eyes were right there in his line of sight in a room gone mostly dark around them.

Jim was there, holding him still, and all Gil could do was concentrate on breathing when he wanted to thank Jim.

"That's good. Better," Jim was saying to him. "Least it proves you can move again, right?" The grip relaxed a little and became more of a comforting presence than a restraint.

At least he could move again, and that was what made Gil's mind start to register what had happened the night before. Being frozen and the fear when he couldn't move, struggling to move, and Jim talking calmly to him, trying to communicate with him. "Sorry... about that."

you're sorry about, so I'll just keep talking."

He managed to dredge up part of a laugh, and shook off a little frustration. Everything was hurting, but... hell, he was still alive. "Glad you didn't take me to a hospital. Thanks."

"Well it was a long way and I don't think I could have carried you to the car..." Jim made it sound light, but Jim often did that. "I'll relax the death grip here a little."

"What time's it?" He vaguely recalled that he was supposed to take medications every so many hours, but even though he was moving, everything was sluggish. Shifting an arm brought out an ache -- probably from having had his muscles clenched tight.

"Around ten I think," Jim replied yawning himself. "I'm glad you unfroze, Gil. Looked like a kinda shell-shock."

That was one thing to call it. Shell shock, when body and mind took a break so cognitive dissonance could settle in for a cage match. "I've done it before."

"Yeah? Go on for long that time, did it? What happens? Your mind just freeze up on you?" Jim asked stroking at his hair absently.

That was nice. No, that was soothing after all of the sharp thoughts of pain that had drifted through Gil's head. "Something like that. I kept trying to stop thinking and to get hold of myself..."

"Well looks like you have. Gil," Jim said yawning again. "Got hold of yourself. You sound like yourself again. You want something to eat or something? I can do toast, or... something."

"Drugs on toast?" Gil joked quietly, closing his eyes. He finally shifted to lie on his back, stretching a little. "Or toast on drugs. You, uh, sleep well? How's your eye?"

"Colorful," Jim replied. "It'll be pretty for a few days and then be gone. It's not bad. Gives me credibility." He stretched as well. "I'll get something in a minute. I wasn't sure how comfortable you would be waking up with me here."

"Why?" Gil shifted one leg, feeling the muscles tug and ache at him. Maybe his brain still wasn't awake, because it was only after he'd asked the why that his brain kicked up an answer -- the very obvious answer.

"Well, we never spoke about..." Jim cleared his throat. "I mean you were raped and then there was the time we... just didn't talk about afterwards.

"I, uh..." Gil turned his head, looking over at Jim. Jim was still lying down, looking like he was lying still, very still, on purpose. "Silence speaks volumes, Jim."

Jim got up rather suddenly. "I guess that means that you didn't want it then. That I did force you. Jesus, Gil why didn't you say something? Press charges... I've been wondering all along why you didn't say anything, now I know."

"Wait, what?" It took a little more effort than he'd been expecting to sit up, to carefully prop himself up on his elbows. "Jim, no, I didn't mean that. I thought that you -- that it was a mistake, and when you didn't say anything, I just..." Shrugged it off. Jim thought he'd forced Gil? Where the hell had that come from?

"Well we were both drunk and I don't remember asking, I just remember doing," Jim looked back at him. "I've tried for a long time to remember asking. Fuck. I thought you would say something and I'd
know what happened. So I take it I did? Or I didn't?"

"Ask?" Gil shifted back a little, contemplating getting to his feet. "I seem to remember asking you." The memory was hazy in spots, well-worn maybe until Gil wasn't sure what had happened and what he'd wished had happened and where he'd filled in blanks, but he did recall asking Jim to do it. That was consent.

Jim looked a bit speechless. He didn't have the temperament for brooding or angst and he looked uncomfortable and relieved. "Oh." He paused a moment and smiled a little. "Should have just asked."

"Right." Gil blinked for a moment, and tried to work out how they'd even reached that topic. It had started with waking up, then Jim asking him if he were all right with it, then... It wasn't easy to follow, but Gil peered at Jim for a moment before he shifted to try to sit fully up. "So when I said, 'Silence speaks volumes', I meant it... to mean that since there wasn't a follow-up call, I assumed it was a bad first date. Or whatever someone would call it. I've learned not to risk friendship when I can."

Jim nodded. "At the risk of really bad timing, if I hadn't been feeling..." He cleared his throat awkwardly. "Uh... guilty, I would have picked it up straight away. So, sleeping in the same bed is okay then?"

"Yeah." It was warmer, which wasn't always a good thing in the desert, but... it couldn't hurt. Having Jim close could help, and that was the most Gil could ask of his friend. "So, can I get a hand up?"

"If you don't want breakfast in bed, yeah," Jim replied stepping closer and reaching out to him.

"I've spent too long in bed," Gil murmured, lifting a hand out to grasp Jim's hand. He was a little taller than Jim, but Jim definitely had the more solid body, the lower center of gravity. His wrists ached, but that was partially the fault of his own subconscious. "I can at least watch you burn toast."

"I burn it well," Jim answered pulling him up and carefully avoiding holding anything painful. "Now move carefully, I bet you'll be stiff."

"Yeah." He sounded a little short, but the sudden shift of body weight onto unsteady legs hurt, reached right up the muscles along his back in pain. "Maybe this wasn't a good idea, huh?"

"Lie back down," Jim said. "No reason to hurt too much if you don't have to."

Gil shifted one foot, and bit back a groan. "No, just... help me to the bathroom. I can manage to get back. I promise I won't try to get down the stairs."

"Just as well I have a bathroom on this level," Jim replied. He smiled as he put his arm around him to support him. "Easy does it then."

One foot in front of the other. Gil sucked in a shaky breath, and sighed, leaning into Jim a little as he did so. "Thanks. So, uh... anything else we should clear up?"

"Nah, I think that was it." Jim shrugged. "I expect we'll trip over a few things. Different identities, unknown pasts. That sort of things."

"I think I'm... still the same person you've always known." He put a hand on the doorjamb, steadying himself as they moved into the bathroom. "Not sure if that helps or hinders."
"Well it's a step up from who you thought you were last night," Jim said with a hint of irony. "I guess it's because I've been a detective for so long. I always assume I don't know the full story about someone."

"I probably don't know your entire story," Gil pointed out as he pulled away to lean on the edge of the counter with his hands. "I never expected anyone to know most of mine."

"Well we can always talk about it when you get bored of puzzles and bad TV," Brass offered. "You need help or you want me out?"

Which made Gil suspicious about whether one was a big deal or not. "I was just going to uh... go to the bathroom and see if any of this needs to be changed." The bandages that were under the t-shirt he was wearing, and the hassle of that was something he hadn't thought about yet.

"In that case I'll stay. You can't stretch well," Jim replied. "It's a pain in the ass messing around with dressings on your own."

"All right. Do you, uh. Should I sit down?" He'd get the hang of it again, eventually. Being comfortable with someone else helping him.

"Probably be best for you," Jim replied putting the lid down on the toilet. "There. We should make sure you didn't rip anything out."

"Last night?" Gil shifted, reaching down to try to see if he had the range of movement to pull his t-shirt up over his head.

Jim helped him a little when he became too sore to move. "Yeah. You had that nightmare and then I practically threw you on the bed. That might've busted something."

"Better than going to the hospital," Gil decided as he set the t-shirt in his lap, and leaned back a little, watching Jim.

"Let's see your wrist. You were set on breaking it last night," Jim pointed out picking up the hand and unwrapping some of the dressings. "They didn't stitch these did they?"

"No. It was probably too wide to bother doing that." He couldn't deny that he'd been set on breaking it, because he had been, or part of him had been.

It was unwrapped carefully, slowly and there was a sign there that he had bled a little, but not too much." Looks pretty okay. Let me go and get the stuff they sent you home with okay? I'll put something fresh on there." Jim suggested even as he was heading out the door. "Take a look at the others as well and I'll bring up your meds."

"Thanks." Gil was going to stay right where he was, but he could start to pick at the edges of bandages. It all needed to be changed with fair regularity, which seemed excessive to Gil -- or would have if he hadn't had so much experience with it.

He heard Jim go down the stairs with a heavy tread. He could hear him rustling around down there and wondered again why he was doing this. He'd been married and this sort of care had tested their bonds to breaking point. Maybe it would for their friendship as well. He didn't want that to happen.

He needed his friends, and he needed Jim. Jim and Catherine and Al and everyone else there in Vegas that he'd known since he came there or since they'd come there. Well, everyone except Ecklie.

He needed someone, something to rebuild on. He could put himself together if he had a stable
enough foundation to stand on, but he had been dreading it because there was no Molly this time. No Kevin. He hadn't been sure who he could build himself back on and then... it seemed like he had no lack of volunteers to be that anchor point.

It seemed very surreal to Gil, and he'd never been more surprised to be wrong in his life. Everyone was trying, offering help, and there'd been that moment in the hospital where he'd been expecting Jim and Sara to get into fisticuffs.

Gil leaned his head back against the wall behind him, and took a deep breath before he pulled at the patch of bandaging at his chest. Who needed chest hair anyway?

Not that there was much left after all the stitching and attention. They had told him that the swelling had gone down and the wounds were knitting slowly. Slowly with Millander's attention carved into his flesh indelibly. He had yet to see the 'Red Dragon'. He imagined the lines and stylized powerful muscles that had made up Dollarhyde's tattoo. Blake's vision of another's vision. The Revelation of Becoming etched into flesh. He could feel the tug of those thoughts waiting to reel him in.

He was going to concentrate. He wasn't going to become anything -- he was Gil Grissom. He was a CSI level 3, recently supervisor. He was a good field officer and he was a scientist, and he wasn't going to let thought memories and tenuous links between events pull him back to that place again.

With only a moment of hesitation, he peeled back the first dressing revealing the first neatly stitched smooth line. After that it was almost compulsive to have to see what he looked like, the stitch thread black like tattoo ink as he revealed more and more of the pattern. It was sore and itchy which meant it was healing but he couldn't see much from where he was peering down at his chest. He needed a mirror.

Gil needed to stand up, and see what he could make of it. He could manage that, get a hand on the counter, another on the lid of the toilet, and lever himself up. Looking in the mirror made him draw a deep breath but he made himself look himself in the eye before he looked down.

Millander had talent, that was true. The Dragon was pure, with simple lines and spread wings over his chest, the removed and now grafted flesh made an eye so wide it reminded him of an owl peering into the night. It wasn't the Red Dragon. It wasn't Blake's avatar of the Devil. It was different somehow and enveloping all of him.

There wasn't any way he was ever going to get rid of that scar. He'd still try once the wounds themselves had healed, but that was a ritual mutilation that he wouldn't be able to shake off. Its head curled up to his left shoulder, just to that cutting mark at his collar bone, the eye peering out from the center of his pectoral. One spreading wing-line cut through a nipple. And the 'shading' that detailed it was dark with stitches, thick lines that looked like embroidery over his chest.

He was lucky to be alive, and all Gil could think of was that it was going to bother him until he could figure out what the dragon stood for.

Blood Dragon, Red Dragon. They were meant to draw that comparison. But if the comparison was meant to be just that then he would have mimicked the picture. He had the talent for it. It wasn't an ugly scar, save in memory. Fuck, there were probably people who would pay for this but he wasn't one of them. He had been marked by a dragon and there was something niggling at him. Something about the way Millander had been talking and context. It was all about context.

Evidence was useless without context, except it kept rising up in his head that the context was pain and rape and Millander breathing hard and groaning over top of him, sucking him off, and then kneeling on his groin to keep him under control while he'd worked on his piece of art. The larger
picture was slipping through his fingers because all he could think of was that.

It felt a little like failing.

He hated to fail. Sometimes he wondered if it was that that brought him back over and over to try again.

"You all right up there, Gil?" Jim called up. "I'm just getting the pills. I put them somewhere and... it was a safe place, you know?"

So safe Jim forgot, probably, and Gil looked at himself in the mirror for a moment when he smiled. Still looked like his face. There wasn't anyone else in the expression, even if most people wouldn't have been looking for it. "I'm okay," he called back. More time to contemplate what Millander had done to him.

"Be with you in a minute," the other man called up and he studied his chest again.

What had Millander said?

~You might enjoy this..~ No, wait was that him or Lecter? Was he blurring the lines between them or drawing distinctions? Or both at the same time. He frowned a little. He had said something about making him recognize rape.

To be sure it was rape. That Millander had been going to make sure he understood it was rape, where he... He, Gil, had called it consent before. Lecter, maybe, a sick strange similarity between the two that drew a distinction.

If that were the pattern and he could feel a pattern there, it was an instinctive knowing that had snapped back into existence when the thoughts of his older self had awakened. He would find that in everything there. A similarity and a distinction. He was sure it was a challenge to Lecter. Sure of it.

If the original Red Dragon was the violator, the kidnapper and the avatar of chaos and evil, then the similarities were obvious. He had been violated, kidnapped and...

He stroked over the rough texture of stitching a moment. Where was the distinction? The opposite. Not chaos and evil, but order and virtue. What were the cardinal virtues again? Wisdom, fortitude, temperance and... Justice.

Justice was the difference, but Justice was not mercy. Justice usually lacked mercy, meting out and uncomplicated. Justice did not Judge and weigh and mitigate, it was. Just like the evidence was, yes or no.

Justice tested. The virtuous man could not be corrupted. Gil paused a moment, fingers touching the owl eye of the dragon on his chest. It hurt to touch, made his chest throb sharply.

"I have been a brother to dragons, a companion to owls..."

Job.

The unwitting victim of a bet between god and Satan, and God had said... God had said something. Gil couldn't remember, and wished that he'd had some religion other than Catholicism to have rejected, because he at least might have read more of the Bible. But it fit. Brother to dragons, companion to owls, and that fit, didn't it? Cops and Agents and scientists, dragons and owls.

He needed a Bible. He needed to find that. Hell, the internet would be better than the Bible.
"Gil? You with me? Or am I going to have to carry you to bed again?"

"What?" He jerked a little to find out that Jim was right up on him, hand on his shoulder. Right there and he'd never even noticed. "No, I was just, I figured it out."

"Great. What exactly?" Jim asked also looking at the reflection that showed the dragon there in stark texture on Gil's body. He put the dressings and pills down but put the hand back on his shoulder.

"I have been a brother to dragons, a companion to owls." Gil waited a beat. "Job. The dragon wasn't the one I thought it was."

"But there was a picture of that painting in the apartment. Cath told me that," Jim said with a slight frown. "So it's a different dragon picture. It's still a red dragon right?"

"Blood might be more accurate," Gil murmured, looking at Jim in the mirror. "This isn't Blake's Red Dragon."

"And how did you get to Job from that then?" Brass asked patiently. "It could be any type of dragon if it's not that one."

"It..." He had to pause, had to keep watching Jim before he looked down. "It was something Millander said."

"Okay. Tell me about it while I put these dressings back on," Jim said reaching for one of the sterile wipes. "I've done enough of my own to know the drill. So, Millander said something and this dragon isn't Blake's Red Dragon?"

"I studied the pictures enough -- it's not any of Blake's dragons. This is a more traditional dragon." He let Jim goad him back to sit on the toilet lid again. "What Millander said..." About rape, but Gil didn't want to bring that up with Jim. He didn't want to talk about it at all, except in the confines of his own skull. "He drew a line between what he was doing and what Lecter had done, for all the similarities."

"So he wanted it to seem the same on the surface but different if you just bothered to look deeper." Jim asked as he wiped around the stitches carefully. "A code then. Like his other crime scenes." Jim glanced at him. "Codes are made to be broken, you know that, but it doesn't have to be you, Gil."

"There are things that the FBI hasn't shared. That Jack hasn't shared, that matter, but... It's hard to explain." He lifted his chin a little, watching Jim and trying to keep his breathing steady despite that it hurt.

"Sorry. Look, I'm in favor of what has to be done being done, but I look at all this and think, hell there's people being paid a whole lot more than you to do this job," Jim pointed out. "Gil, I know you're good, I know Will Graham was the best. I read the books, too, but that doesn't mean you're the only one with skills. If you need to back off from this, you back off. We pass on the tips and let them look."

"I..." Didn't want them having the tips. Not that one, but Gil could see the sense of what Jim was saying. "Who would I tell? Jim, it's not something I'm proud of having done..."

"Tell me. Or Cath. Not Jack, because I know we won't fuck you over, but Jack... Jack is another matter," Jim replied sticking on another dressing. "Look, if you're right about it being a challenge to Lecter, he'll know by now. Sorry, Gil, but that's something that's unavoidable. It hit the news; it hit the FBI pretty quick. That's already done. The difference is this time you don't have a team that's going to leave you hanging out to dry."
"I was the team, Jim. I left myself hanging out to dry. There was Price in prints, but that was when everything was indexed in books. Bloom, our official psychological consult, we had a documents tech and a trace tech, and... Jack." Him and Jack, and they were it, the meat of the team, with a full array of technicians at their disposal, but they'd never had any field training. It would've been like putting Greg on a scene and telling him to collect evidence.

"Playing it fast and loose, huh?" Jim looked up at him a moment and then cocked his head slightly. "So that's why you're a stickler for process."

"So everything doesn't rest on one person. So the strength of the case can carry it," he murmured, looking back at Jim with ease on his expression. "I'm just not used to being the other side of it."

"No one is. Being investigated gives you a whole new appreciation of how things work," Jim answered with a quirk in his expression that made it obvious he knew what he was talking about from personal experience. "Healing up well. Gil."

As well as he could. Gil watched Jim concentrate and fiddle with the tape, and he closed his eyes for a moment. "Jim? I don't know where to start. Because I know that my eureka moments won't stand up in court because I'm the victim in this." It was just a shame that he couldn't give his thoughts to someone else for a couple of weeks and turn his own brain off.

"We'll work out something." Brass said confidently. He continued in silence for a while. "Gil? If you think this is going to make it to court, you're in a different world."

There was something in his eyes then that was utterly uncompromising. The moment when his friend moved from easy going to pure diamond.

"Stranger things have happened." Lecter had gone to court, even if he'd been ruled not guilty by reason of insanity, and given life sentences to an asylum. "I want to imagine that Millander stumbles up, is easily caught and things... carry forwards."

"I want to imagine he resists arrest," Jim replied giving him another look even as he dressed the last area. "That would suit me fine. Especially if I'm there."

"I don't want you there." It was the most he could say on the matter without having to articulate it better than he was capable of in that moment. "I want you safe. Any other case... but this one."

"Well I'm going to be hanging around wherever you are, Gil, so..." Jim shrugged. "You stay safe, so will I. You're not being tossed out as bait on this one. There... all done. You better take your pills."

Gil absently rubbed over one wrist. He could smell coffee, faintly -- the scent of grounds on Jim's hands a little stronger than antibacterial ointment and the smell of bandages. He'd probably set the pot brewing downstairs, and while Gil couldn't have any, he could enjoy the smell. "When... if Catherine comes around, I need to tell her some things for the case." He'd tell Jim in his own time, as it entered his head, as he found words.

"Sure. Knowing Cath, she'll be around to make sure I haven't screwed up or anything," Jim said with a faint smile. "But you are getting back to bed and I'll get toast or something. I'm going to need to go get groceries you can eat, Gil."

"You probably have some beer near the back that's fermented to the point that I could chew it," Gil teased quietly, watching Jim line up the pills for him. "You haven't screwed anything up. I'm glad you're letting me stay here."

"We'll, it's been a long time since I shared space with anyone. Or a bed," Jim replied. "So, screwing
up is a possibility. And if I'd known about the other thing, I would have asked you to stay a lot sooner."

"If you, uh, want to, we can work on that... sometime when I can think straight. After this," Gil offered, trying to sound as genuine as he felt. Jim knew him, and Jim knew that even Gil had to have limits, and he was bad with relationships to begin with. But not so bad as not to think before he mentioned to Jim that Millander knew that Gil had issues with the lines between consent and not-consent. He didn't even want to think of how Millander had found that out.

Millander seemed to either be as much of a warped genius as Lecter, or he had some direct link into the computer systems. Or both.

"Sounds good. So toast, yeah? Or cereal or something equally healthy?"

Gil picked up the pills, and then took the glass of water that Jim offered him to take with them. "Toast is good." It almost went over his head that Jim was agreeing to the idea, and that they were planning or hoping to edge towards some tentative, unclear... something. Gil wasn't going to think about it until he was at least physically better. Couldn't think about it before then because it wasn't fair to Jim to make decisions when he wasn't in his right mind.

From the silent form of agreement he got from Jim helping him back to the bed, helping him swill down the pills and then the way he headed off downstairs and the aroma of burning toast drifted up a little later, Jim knew when it was time to stop pushing.

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Somehow he'd ended up being the lab's resident Millander expert, which was a little bit worrying. He was given as much time as Catherine could carve out of the schedule for him, but cases came in all the time and had to be dealt with. Even so, even with the leads starting to run into dead ends, he had brought up a pretty clear picture of what the deal was with the guy. The only thing he didn't know what how it connected with Grissom or with Lecter. He just had to find the right angle and then maybe the triangle would line up.

And that meant getting close to Sara and the other side of the triangle. Lecter.

Nick entered the office Sara had been using, finding her staring at the assorted photo's and papers with an intensity that was almost scary. But that pretty much was Sara described down to the ground. He liked her. She was great to work with on a case, but she had that weird kind of intensity that Grissom had sometimes that worried them all. Well, it worried them about her and not about Grissom, because they all knew that Grissom was the one who always advised restrained sympathy towards victims. Who always advised not to get in too deep, to work the evidence and nothing more.

"Hey. Sara?" Nick knocked gently on the doorjamb, peering at her.

"Hey, Nick." Sara glanced up at him. "Just trying to get my head around all of this Lecter stuff. It's heavy going. Something I can do for you?"

"I thought maybe since we're working the same case in the end, we could share information and try to figure out what the connection is," Nick offered, stepping into the room. "How's all of that coming?"


"Well, I've got why he was killing the first victims, and he seems pretty set on justice and reenacting
it," Nick murmured, moving to stand by the table. It was hard not to study the pictures, letters and drawings on

"Well Lecter, from the look of it, has a rare form of thought that one expert called pure sociopathy," Sara replied and bit at her lip. "Which means he has reasons for the way he acts but they just don't fit the definition of normal. He has a hatred of crudeness to the point of extreme violence, but he is rare in being able to control and delay his urge to kill or lash out. Millander is looking for justice then? As an agent of justice or trying to find it?"

"Both. Mostly as an agent, I'd say. Think 'avenging angel' in a fucked up way," Nick murmured. He wasn't looking at a picture of some guy who looked like his boss, a lot like his boss, younger, naked, with his stomach cut open and entrails hanging out. No, nope, he wasn't looking at that.

"Well then." Sara straightened up. "Lecter is pretty much the one that got away, isn't he? High profile and with a connection to Grissom. Once you start looking, it's not hard to work out that Lecter has never really let go of Grissom and there's a ready formed piece of bait. I don't know why he was interested in Grissom to start with, though."

"Who, Lecter or Millander?" Nick leaned over the table a little, looking at the pictures. "That's kind of easy to explain, right? Just look at these pictures Lecter drew, Sara."

"I was talking about Millander. Lecter I understand now," Sara replied. "He respects people with minds, and Gil proved he had one."

"There's a pattern Millander was following -- birthdays going backwards," Nick offered, stepping back a little. "August 17th. First victim was 1959, then 1958. So, he skipped a year to 1956 -- Grissom's birthdate. And Grissom said in his statement that Millander was doing it to bait Lecter."

"And it would. It really would bait him because he's almost literally put his mark on Grissom," Sara said point to a picture of an exposed area of abdomen that was in the process of healing. She tapped it thoughtfully. "Why would any of this have anything to do with Job, and why would Millander be provoking Lecter? Because he'll be on his way, no doubt about it."

"Well..." Nick looked at the picture, too, and then to Sara's intent expression. "It could have to do with that part about God and Satan. The whole thing started with a bet that Job wouldn't be a believer in God if his life wasn't good. And God pretty much said, 'Hell yes he will be'. So they both put Job through hell to test him."

"Well since I started looking at the scene as if it were some sort of code to Lecter things are coming together and that fits," Sara replied thoughtfully and tapped a picture illustration in front of her. "See this? This is the print of Blake's Red Dragon that was an obsession of Dollarhyde, the guy Lecter puppetted to get back at Grissom. Look at the position of the woman -- pretty similar to how Gil was spread-eagled. And it's about the innocent being pursued by evil, victimized. If that weren't enough, it's from the book of Revelations. It's the start point. It's the fact that the innocent suffer from injustice most of all. And the one Millander cut into Grissom Millander is a Red Dragon, but not the same one. It's different... if it relates to Job, it's the fact that the innocent make sacrifices to win out in the end. To be rewarded."

To be rewarded. Nick didn't want to guess what Millander considered a reward. "So... assuming that Millander thinks he's God, the God of Job, a God who didn't seem much better than Satan. So this is some... victimization of an innocent to get a win against evil."

"And presumably a snark against Lecter, casting him in the role of the Devil," Sara added. "The FBI guys are looking for homage and it looks like that on the surface, but with what you've just said and
the other evidence. The food is a direct reference to Lecter, but the pudding of fecal matter is... well basically saying he thinks Lecter is crudeness pretending to be something else. I'm not sure why he ate parts of himself though. That's just... weird."

"Maybe he was trying to frame Lecter for it." Nick shrugged his shoulders a little. "I mean. If Griss had died and hadn't been able to give a statement, and we found evidence that suggested two people there and that one of them had been eaten and shit out... We would've guessed that Millander was dead. Right?"

"That's a good point," Sara said slowly obviously thinking. "Lecter would have come whether Gil had lived or died. It was only luck that they got there in time. All the details culminate to be an insult to Lecter though, I'm sure of that. An insult and a challenge he couldn't ignore and still be him. The problem is I'm not sure what he might do when Lecter takes up the challenge. Any ideas?"

"Well, if you're a vigilante seeking justice, you kill the person you're trying to catch." That was kind of obvious to Nick, but Sara had clearly been over-thinking things for a while now.

"But how? I mean he went to a very elaborate way to set this all up," Sara frowned a little. "Is he just going to try and gun him down? Murder-suicide him?"

"Well, if he's smart, he'll try to get him somewhere, maybe lure him out somehow, and kill him fast. Lecter's pretty well known for turning psycho if he gets his back against a wall." Nick thought for a moment, trying to remember what he'd read during the initial investigation. "When he broke out initially, he wore a policeman's face over his own as a disguise. There's no limit to what he'd do for his continued freedom. He tried to kill Griss... Graham and they were pretty involved with each other, right? But anything for freedom. Millander has to know that, so he'd aim for whatever is safest for him."

"That's where we get stuck. How far is Millander willing to go to get what he wants? To get this Justice?" Sara asked shaking her head a little. "Grissom's stuck between them both, that's the worrying thing. He's the logical point of contact."

"Maybe Millander is waiting for Lecter to contact Grissom somehow, show himself that way. Maybe Grissom's the trap?"

Sara nodded slowly. "Bait. This could get messy, Nick, very messy."

That was an understatement and a half. Millander and Lecter facing off in Vegas? It was like a serial killer prize fight, and Nick didn't particularly want to be anywhere near the ring when the fight broke out. "So what next? I've run out of leads. Millander's next move depends on Lecter being seen, and unless he slips up or runs out of food wherever he's holed up..."

"I guess we're stuck unless there's some way of knowing what Millander is planning to do when Lecter gets here from all of this," Sara replied. "Because no matter what the FBI says, that's as far as it goes. I don't think Millander is turning into Lecter at all. Agent Crawford won't like that."

"Agent Crawford doesn't like much," Nick noted as he reached forwards to rifle quickly through the papers. "And Lecter doesn't like him. I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't stop to make the guy an hors d'oeuvre."

"He hasn't done that so far," Sara mused and shrugged "On the other hand I'm not sure if he's had opportunity. So what do I say to Catherine and the Feds? Wait until Lecter turns up?"

"You say... yeah. And suggest that they heighten the APB for Millander so we can cut this off before
it gets worse. He's going to stay in the Vegas area."

"You know..." Sara said thoughtfully. "They're both going to be after Gil. We want a heads up on them; I guess the FBI should be watching him."

"Watching Brass's house, you mean." Yeah, that was a good idea, because maybe they could nip the issue in the bud, get one or both of the killers before things got that bad.

"That's our only lead." Sara seemed a little prickly when he mentioned Brass, he noticed that. Jealous maybe? They all knew about Sara's feelings for Grissom. She was fairly obvious about it.

"Yeah, it is our only lead. That's the only thing we can be sure is going to happen, so... Let's suggest it to Catherine and see where the higher-ups take it from there?" The jealousy was almost palpable, and it didn't make sense to Nick. Brass was Brass. He was their boss, and he'd been a good one, and now he was a good homicide cop, even if he and Warrick hadn't ever gotten along. Except Sara didn't know him as anything other than the homicide detective.

She nodded and frowned. "I just hope we get them before they get to Grissom again. I don't know how he's able to come back from this, let alone worse. I think it'd finish him if something else happened."

"Why do you say that?" Nick hadn't exactly studied it to the same level of intensity that Sara had, and he'd only taken a glance over those notes, but Grissom was like a man made of steel. He could get through anything, or at least it seemed like he could.

"He's lost everything he had to Lecter, and now it's happened all over again with Millander," Sara said packing up the pictures and notes. "You do realize that only a few people survived Lecter and the other ones that did are completely insane? He had to give up his family because of Lecter, his job, everything. And then we have Millander who nearly kills him, rapes him and then puts him right back in the zone where he could lose everything else again? He must be on the edge. I hope Brass is looking after him."

Because she wanted to but wasn't being allowed to, Nick guessed. He handed over the letter that he'd been half looking at. "But think about it. Even through all of this, he's still writing letters to the guy. Lecter. That's..."

"... the only way he could keep him from coming after him," Sara said as if her opinion were the definitive version of events. "Lecter was willing to let him dangle on the hook as long as he knew he was dangling. If it looked like he'd make a break for it, he would have been back. And you just know the FBI would want him to keep it up. Lecter might just give a clue or get careless."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure Crawford encouraged it," Nick agreed, watching as each piece of paper was carefully filed back into the right evidence bag.

"Well, that's his job," Sara said not looking at him as she put the items away. "To try and get Lecter back. He has to use what he can." It was a very cold, calculating way of looking at things.

"So you're okay with him using human beings that he's already done a lot to hurt to get a guy?" Nick looked sideways at Sara, not quite willing to believe that she'd said that. "What happened to victims coming first, huh?"

"Lecter isn't an ordinary murderer," she replied, glancing at him. "I've studied the files, Nick. He's got to be stopped, somehow, anyhow. I know, I never thought I'd say that, but then, I've never come
across a killer like him. It's not okay to use people like that but if it's the only option, then it's one that has to be taken. Otherwise he'll just keep on killing."

"But he got the other agent Crawford was using to get him, didn't he? Griss is next and the end result is pretty predictable, isn't it, Sara? Would you be comfortable being a victim of his?"

"No, I wouldn't but I would want him stopped if I were," Sara replied. "And he didn't kill Agent Starling, he... subverted her. Brainwashed her, they think. Grissom is still the only one who's remotely free of him. That makes him a special case."

It made Nick worry that she could start thinking like that. Like the FBI and Crawford, and not see a problem with it.

"Which is a great reason to sacrifice him to the lions, right? Do you realize that if things were reversed he'd be doing everything in his power to keep you out of harm's way right now? Not just casually suggesting what you just did." It was a little unbelievable, that Sara would suggest that, would hint that Gil made Great bait.

"I don't want Grissom in harm's way," Sara replied raising her voice a little. "What I'm saying is that it is going to happen whether we want it to or not. I've studied the files, the history. That is what happens over and over. What I'm saying is that we should take advantage of it. Be ready for it, because we could lock Grissom on the other side of the moon and Lecter would get there, Nicky. Trust me on this, it's not speculation, it's a fact and Millander knows it, too!"

"I'm not saying it's not fact. I'm saying..." Nick wasn't sure what he was saying, except that she'd sounded creepily detached for a moment. "Never mind. Need help putting this stuff up?"

"Sure. Then we can go and talk to Catherine together. See if she's in a better mood," Sara replied still sounding a little sharp around the edges.

Yeah, a better mood than Sara was. Nick nodded, and tried not to look at the pictures that he was putting away. The hand-drawn sketches were the worst, and he couldn't imagine keeping things that fucked up and graphic in a box in his bedroom.

He didn't like to think of Grissom as vulnerable because since he had been CSI, the older man always had the answers. Or some ingenious idea about how to find the answers. If he said somebody had done well, they knew it wasn't just being said, it was real and the sort of approval worth its weight in gold.

The concept of him being vulnerable disturbed Nick and made him uncertain how to help except for working as hard as he could. It was weird, but the only thing he could think of to do. It was probably the thing that Gil was likely to appreciate the most, so Nick tried not to think too hard about the pictures, and tried to keep his mind on the case. Even if Grissom was the case. Things like that, keeping things like that, implied a certain amount of mental disturbance, a certain amount of brainwashing, too.

Maybe that hadn't crossed Sara's mind.

They put away the last of the evidence and Sara nodded. "Come on, let's see what our temporary boss has to say about our idea," she said, and Nick began to wonder for the first time if Sara was really thinking about going to the FBI. He'd laughed when Greg had mentioned it last time he was down in DNA because they had a healthy disdain for the superiority of the Feds, but the way she
was acting? It was like Agent Crawford had done a little brainwashing of his own.

Or maybe it had to do with Grissom and Brass. She'd only been there three months, but it was pretty clear that she was there because Griss not only wanted Warrick to stay on the team, but because there'd been a little something going on between them. But who knew when, right? And it was probably frustrating when the object of said desires was staying with the male equivalent of a cock-block.

Pussy-block?

Nick shook his head at himself and followed her into the hallway.

Gil had a lot of reasons not to get close to someone. His apparent fear of intimacy had a very practical and visible root when his past came to light, and he liked to think it was less of a dysfunction than a necessary sacrifice, no matter what other people thought. However, having not really dated successfully for over a decade, having lost his family to the screwed up emotional situation, he did sometimes find that he was out of practice when it came to other people and relating to what they were doing emotionally.

He had no idea what Brass was doing at all. None of his behaviors seemed to follow any sort of logic. He could not for the life of him work out why he was putting up with him when every bit of experience Gil had told him that he should have been pushed out to fend for himself pretty early on.

He'd been out of the hospital for a week now. That was more time than he'd expected to have with Jim, let alone time spent actually resting. When he'd been notified by Covallo that he was given two weeks of mandatory rest before he was allowed to come back to the lab, Gil had wondered if someone had spiked the water. If it had been anyone else but him, it was procedure. But everyone knew that Gil didn't need that kind of time off.

He probably would've been able to recover faster if he'd been left in the lab instead of trying to work out why Jim was putting up with him. It couldn't have been easy -- in a week he'd punched Jim, kicked him a few times in his sleep, woken him up more times than Gil cared to count, had needed help standing up in the shower, and... The list went on and on, a list of things that Gil knew had frustrated Molly no end after he'd survived Lecter.

Jim on the other hand just... took it. He made bad jokes about his ability to punch. Even worse ones about him trying to get in the shower with him. When Gil was woken by a nightmare, he didn't get out of the bed and say he would have to sleep elsewhere, he just rolled closer and held him to a comforting warmth. And snored in his ear quietly -- even that was comforting in a strange way.

He made him food, talked in a laid back, easy way, made him watch TV, and all in all somehow even knowing that would have been a purgatory at another point in his life, it was actually quite pleasant.

He was relaxed, and it didn't make sense. Somewhere when he hadn't been looking, he'd managed to slot himself back together mostly, and that wasn't quite like the last time, either. Or maybe he hadn't had enough time to test himself.

After all, the challenges of finding what page he'd been on in one of Jim's books were decidedly less than trying to take care of Kevin while Molly was at work.

He'd been terrified that he would slip and do something to him, or freeze up at a critical moment. Looking back on it, it hadn't been the most relaxing of atmospheres to try and piece himself back
Right now Jim was cooking something -- it surprised him that Jim could cook and pretty well, when he had to, though he admitted he didn't bother much for just one -- and holding some rambling conversation, half with him and half with himself as he was in the living room on the laptop. "... and there was Warrick, pissed as anything because Nick had put his body souped clothes right next to his going out gear and he had to cancel his date or end up smelling like death all night." Jim chuckled to himself as he chopped some more vegetables.

Gil felt a little bad about not helping, about not being useful, but the last time he'd tried to do more than sit at the kitchen table with a book in hand, watching Jim move around in the kitchenette, he'd been shooed unceremoniously out of the room. He didn't have to learn that lesson twice, so Gil sat and watched and listened. "I don't know why he didn't just throw them out."

"Lucky date clothes, Gil. You don't mess with them," Jim said with a half smile. "But I'm guessing you don't have lucky date clothes. Not that I do either, really." More chopping and then he threw the vegetables into a steamer.

"Same principle, I guess. Is that the one Catherine bought you?" Jim asked looking up at him over the table.

"Got it in one. How'd you guess?" That had been the shirt that had sparked a particularly nasty argument with Eddie, actually, and Gil wondered how Catherine was faring through the still pending divorce.

"It's a nice shirt and Cath has good taste," Jim replied. "I always meant to ask, have you and she... you know... ever... ?"

"Ever... ?" Gil tilted his head a little, peering at Jim while he worked until the suggestion fit itself into Gil's brain on his own. Oh, ever done that. "No."

"You're both pretty close. I would have put odds on that coming off instead of the Sara thing," Jim replied with a half smirk. "Seeing as how I've got nothing in the way of options going on at all."

Sometimes Gil wondered if Jim was trying to bait him. He watched Jim for a minute, watched him scoop up chopped vegetables to dump them into a pan. Sometime, before Jim kicked him out on his ass, he'd have to show him that he was a fairly decent cook, too. "Nothing at all? I was pretty sure I was delirious when we had that conversation, but I didn't think I was that delirious."

"I like to give you the opportunity to change your mind, considering," Jim replied. "Considering until that night I hadn't really figured you for liking guys at all."

"I never would have guessed that you did, either," Gil countered. "I don't advertise either way. It's just that everyone assumes a man prefers women until proven otherwise."

"It's not like I was secretly repressing it or anything. I was happy being married for the first couple of years or so. Then I really got to know Janice and it went downhill from there," Jim replied as he bent to look in the oven. "I did my playing the field early. Discovered I was pretty happy with whatever fell in my lap, but you know how it is. You're taught to look straight so you do that out of habit more than anything."
He did know how that was. That was probably why gender wasn't a determining factor for Gil -- it narrowed his chances for no particular reason at all. "I'd actually had a boyfriend before I met Molly." And things had gone naturally sour there, a general incompatibility that Gil couldn't blame on anyone. "Do you mind if I ask what happened with Janice? You've told me bits and pieces..."

Jim shrugged a little. "She liked the fact I was a cop, then she hated it. She wanted stable and secure, then she hated it when she got it. In the end I kept turning to look the other way so much my neck was tied up in knots. And she just... there's a limit to my pride, you know? I had an affair more in retaliation than anything and she took that as the excuse. By then I think I was doing it to throw the doors open."

It sounded so much more bitter and acrimonious than any argument he and Molly ever had. There was the silent treatment, slammed doors, and then she'd sneak up behind him when he was smoking on the porch, and lay her head on his shoulder. Easy as that, enough to get either of them to apologize for whatever the hell it was. "I know that saying 'I'm sorry' right now doesn't mean a thing. But I wish you hadn't had to go through that to end up here."

Jim smiled a little. "Yeah. Thanks. It's Ellie that I regret. I don't regret anything else, but I regret what it did to her."

Of course he would. Jim didn't talk about Ellie much but he had a picture in his wallet. Most of the department didn't even know there was an Ellie. "When she's an adult, hopefully she'll understand what happened."

Jim shook his head. "I doubt it. Janice will have put the blame on me, I know that much. She doesn't think I know but... well, I found out and that was the beginning of the end. I never had a daughter, Gil. Not really. And I was so wounded by that I let it drive me away from the nearest thing... right up to Vegas."

"You never had a daughter?" Gil frowned for a moment, and of course reality followed shortly after the thought. "She wasn't yours."

"That's right. My best friend Mike, on the force." Jim shrugged again. "Who incidentally I turned in along with a load of other Jersey cops for playing dirty. But by then, there was nothing left there for me, you know?"

"And when there's nothing left, there's nothing to do but move on." Gil's mouth twitched a little as he looked down at the book he'd been reading. Jim called it shit, but it was something popular he'd picked up to keep himself busy while Gil had been spending most of his time sleeping. As far as crime novels went, Gil had read better in reports, but it was amusing to nitpick it in his head. "I ended up out here because this is where Jack helped me set up."

"Don't tell me that," Jim replied. "I don't need a reason to be grateful to Jack. I'll tell you something, in Jersey? He would have had a mysterious accident pretty quickly."

"It's a shame we weren't up a little further north instead of in Maryland." Gil rubbed at his temple. "I couldn't ever hurt Jack. I've just been tempted occasionally. It was my fault for agreeing to take the jobs."

"Like you really had a choice," Jim said poking a knife into his vegetables to see how long they needed. "Let me guess it was like a scene out of... one of those movies Archie always goes on about. Help us, Gil, you're our only hope! What are you meant to say to that? No? I'm taking time out from
saving lives?"

"I was," Gil shrugged. "I was working as a coroner. I managed to dodge him at work, but he caught up with me at home. It was... he showed me pictures of the two families. When they were alive." Emotional manipulation, but Jack was good for a reason. That was what Jack did. "The deal was that he was going to protect me. I should have known better by then. But you can still be young and stupid at thirty."

"Yeah, look at Sanders," Jim grinned a little. "I still reckon that Crawford is lazy. From what I hear, our guys are managing to piece things together."

"How's that lazy?" Gil glanced up at Jim, watching that grin. He was glad that even if he was there being a problem, Jim could at least still smile. "He came in, stirred everyone up, and they're doing his work for him. That's creative."

"He never has to do it himself. Because he has a 'King Cobra' to take the chances for him," Jim replied. "You on the other hand, never ask something of one of your team that you wouldn't do or haven't done yourself."

"Neither would you." He'd always liked that about Jim. He didn't demand the impossible, just that things be done right the first time. Gil leaned his chin on one hand. "Did he explain why they called Will that?"

"Not in so many words." The way he looked at Gil asked for the explanation though. "You want to tell me?"

Jim should have guessed that if Gil were unwilling to explain, he wouldn't have brought it up. It was more reminiscing than he'd done in a long time, but sorting some of it out, explaining it to Jim, seemed to be some internal test that Gil was running. No matter what he threw at Jim, Jim didn't flinch. "They came up with it at Quantico after I took down my first serial case. I was a snake that took out other snakes. It was supposed to be a joke, but I know some of my colleagues meant it seriously. To them, I was their sociopath, their crazy who could catch the other crazies."

"You're not a sociopath, Gil," Jim said immediately. "There's a difference. You can tell the difference."

"I know that." He couldn't help but drum his fingers on the cover of the book a little. "Except that I failed the department's psych evaluation. Now, if you were on the other end of that evaluation, would you believe the test or the man who scored those results but insists that he's not a dangerous sociopath, just a creative thinker? It didn't bother me. Molly thought it was funny."

"Too much trust in bits of paper," Jim replied. "Besides... King Cobra? It's kinda dated isn't it? Sort of Miami Vice. Did you used to go in for stubble and linen suits?" He was faintly teasing as they talked. Gil noticed he did that a lot.

"Skinny ties, and I had a beard. There are pictures somewhere back in my town house if you want a real laugh." He sat back a little, watching Jim's smirk. "I'd bet money that you had the big sideburns, didn't you?"

"For a very short time, yeah, I did. But you look unbalanced when your hair starts to fly south," Jim replied. "A beard huh? I could see you with a beard."

"It made the weeks where I hardly had time to eat let alone think of shaving much easier to deal
with.” And he'd kept it even after that, but when he'd started out in Vegas, it had made sense to make a simple change to his appearance. Like it would really fool anyone.

Jim smiled and poked at the vegetables again. "Nearly done. Things haven't changed much there then, huh? I guess you were part of a rare breed then. I mean, you wrote the text book for forensic psychology. And forensic entomology. Just as well we have a lab of geeks, they were awed more than anything else."

"Then it doesn't take much. There are probably better forensic entomologists out there, ones who spend more time on research than I do. I know there are better forensic psychologists." Gil shifted to stand up, feeling a little restless. Maybe he could pour drinks or something.

"That's a matter of opinion," Jim said evidently pleased at the state of the vegetable. "Okay, vegetables done and the chicken... You ready to eat?"

'Yeah. I was just going to ask if there's anything I could help you with," Gil offered, steadying himself just a little with the edge of the kitchen table.

"Could you set places? Unless you want to eat and watch TV?" Jim asked absently as he rather haphazardly drained the healthy vegetables. "You know, I'm losing weight cooking for you. You're making me eat right."

"Hey, that's a benefit for having me here, isn't it?" Getting the plates was easy, easy as remembering what cabinet they were in and pulling out the drawer that had the forks and knives.

"Yeah. Might put me in good shape for those pursuits of suspects huh? Can't wait for someone else to do it now. Have to admit, it gets the old adrenaline pumping, clearing a scene again," Jim said as he brought the pans over. It was very much a help yourself sort of affair.

Gil liked that, the weird casualness. He'd been known to cook something and eat it right at the sink standing up, so. At least he and Jim were bothering with plates. "Great. You'll have plenty of opportunity for that soon."

"Clearing scenes? Adrenaline?" The chicken was put on the tables, baked in some sort of ready made sauce Jim had opened up and then put in a few extras. Not too fancy, but better than a TV dinner. "Help yourself."

"Clearing scenes. You still have a week off, don't you?" Gil set plates down, and backtracked to get two glasses of water, moving carefully. That chunk of muscle that Millander had hacked out of his chest had changed his range of arm motion a little, and between that and the stitches, there was still a lot for Gil to get used to.

"Yeah. It's been pretty restful so far. Usually I don't do anything useful with my vacation time. Sometimes I try and visit Ellie but..." He shrugged. "Let's just say the less said about Christmas the better." He started spooning vegetables onto his plate the moment it arrived.

"Rough?" Gil guessed, reaching to put some of the chicken onto his own plate. "I send a card every year."

"I've had wisdom teeth extractions that are less painful," Jim commented taking some himself as he looked at Grissom. "You ever wish it could have been different?"

"Occasionally. But if I spend much time wondering how things could've been, I know I'll drive
myself right up a wall again." Wondering what life would've been like if Molly hadn't left, what life would've been like if the Dollarhyde case hadn't happened at all, wondering what life would've been like if Lecter hadn't gutted him in the first place.


"I'm surprised." He broke part of the chicken into a small mouthful, and chewed carefully. "You've helped a lot."

"It's not like I've done much. We don't sit around dissecting everything," Jim answered as he finished a mouthful. "I probably break ten rules of dealing with victims every time I open my mouth. Nah, if things are working, you're the one making it work."

"I didn't know there were rules for dealing with victims. Wanna toss out a couple that you think you've broken?" Not exactly normal dinner talk, but the night before had been about weird places to find a body and worst excuses for a murder. Jim had won the last one with the 'he looked at me funny' excuse, but the body issue was still up in the air.

"Well calling you a victim is probably a no-no. I expect your self-esteem is irreparably damaged," Jim said not sounding that worried. "Getting into your bed. I'm pretty sure there are rules about that somewhere."

"Ah, the requirement that anyone who's been hurt be treated with kid gloves. Everyone should be issued with a roll of bubble wrap on the way out of the hospital, right?" Gil shook his head, and chewed on a piece of celery. "But you can't generalize like that, and I seem un-irreparably damaged."

"I'll take that as the good news," Jim nodded at him and smiled a little. "I probably should have told a doctor about the catatonic state, and possibly have concentrated on getting you to explore your feelings or something. Not that I'd know what to do if you did."

"Not that I'd know what to do if I did," Gil countered. He stuck his fork into the chicken again, making slow, steady headway on dinner.

"You can always try if you want. I'll just improvise or something," Jim said smiling a little. "Or change the subject. I'm good at that. Chicken okay?"

"The chicken is great. And better than take-out, which is my yardstick of edibility." It was his turn to tease back a little, watching Jim. He seemed comfortable and Gil still couldn't peg down why. Unless it was what they'd discussed, and that was a lot to go through for something that Jim said he wasn't sure about. "The subject change is also appreciated."

"Mr. Subtlety here," Jim replied. "It's pretty easy to do, it's just I don't normally bother for myself. I usually eat out with you guys or something. Get shown up by your healthy choices. Look good compared to the fry-ups Nick and Warrick have."

"For all the good that my healthy choices have done me," Gil mocked, patting his stomach. Bandages crinkled a little, or maybe that was the tape. He hadn't ever been thin, though -- solid and muscled was a way of life, something he'd been since he was a kid.

"Hey, who knows what you would have been like if you hadn't? Maybe much worse." Jim pointed out. "We're going to try avoiding any more of that just now. I think that would be a good idea. So..."
"You got any ideas about what you want to do this week? You want me to get stuff for you now you're more mobile?"

"I want to test just how mobile I am without straining myself." Gil sat back a little, eating slower now, picking through the vegetables. They tasted good, but he could only eat so much at a time, and the chicken was better. "Any ideas?"

"Aside from walking around the house? We could take a drive out somewhere up to the desert if you wanted," Jim suggested. "Somewhere pretty flat at least."

"Okay. Let's do that tomorrow." Today was a lazier day, and the sun would be coming up soon. Catherine had muttered something about the two of them being the only guys who got time off and stuck to night shift hours.

"Sounds like a plan," Jim replied. "Anything else? Hey you want a drink?"

"This water's fine." And so was watching Jim ruminate over what to say next. A little quiet hadn't ever killed Gil, and he enjoyed it when it happened. Liked just to look around and take things in and think without thinking. Nothing deep, nothing coherent, and Jim was peering at him. Huh.

"If we're going out, you ought to have a gun handy, you know that right?" Jim said after a few moments contemplation.

"Why? So we can have an accidental shooting in the desert?" It seemed a little paranoid of Jim -- and why did he have to have a gun?

"You don't want to?" Jim asked. "A bit of protection and all that. That's why."

"Because you're worried about Lecter showing up," Gil filled in, gesturing with his fork as he talked. "Am I right?"

"Yeah. Or Millander. Of course I'm worried," Jim replied. "I'd be stupid not to worry."

"In this case, any advantage we have would come from numbers, not arming me." After all, he'd had a gun when Millander had gotten him for all the good it'd done him.

"You don't want to carry one, do you? Didn't we have this argument a few times when I was your boss?" Jim asked as he finished his food off.

"Three or five times," Gil agreed, taking another sip of water. "Would you feel better if I took one when we go out tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I think I probably would." Jim replied. "In case a coyote decide to jump on you if nothing else. Didn't we have a case with that once?"

"Yeah." That had been a messy one, a hiking couple who died of exsanguination from their wounds before help could arrive. "I'll carry a gun in case of wild animals, then. Four footed or otherwise."

"Good. I'll lend you my spare," Jim replied. "Want any dessert? I might have something somewhere." He sounded a bit dubious but he was making the effort.

"No, but thanks. I'm full." And for good measure he poked his fork at the plate again, pushing around a carrot he hadn't gotten to. "Do you want to put on a movie?"
"Yeah, we could. I'll let you choose. It's your turn," Jim replied pretty much throwing his used plates and pans in the sink. "I'll get to them tomorrow or something."

Gil stood up to set his own plates carefully on top of Jim's, turning on the water to rinse them a little. "If it turns into 'or something' you're going to attract cockroaches for me to look at. And while I appreciate the gesture, Jim..."

Jim smirked a little. "I wouldn't do it for anyone else," he said waiting for him to join him. Gil knew he wouldn't really let it build up that much. Jim's place was surprisingly neat and tidy even if he excused it as a form of preemptive laziness.

It was less cluttered than Gil's, a heavy reminder that a lot of his paper clutter could probably be shoved into a trash can without him looking through it and he wouldn't miss a thing of it.

Later. He could tackle that later. Maybe suggest to Jim that he come over with a can of wood polish and a maid's outfit and help Gil clean his place up. After three weeks of being relatively empty except for Nick going in to feed his bugs (and then Nick having taken Gil's bugs home with him because it was easier and made sense), the dust was going to be overwhelming.

"That's good to know." Gil wandered past the DVD rack Jim had, and only had to briefly contemplate what relatively bad movie he wanted to put in. "How about 'A Better Tomorrow'?"

"Sounds good. I'm just getting a beer -- you put it on. You want anything else? Because once I'm sitting down Gil, it takes a lot to move me," Brass warned him as he sidestepped to the fridge and pulled out a cold beer.

"No, I'm good." Gil managed to sit down, relaxing back. "Oh, wait -- pills."

"Stay there and start the movie, I'll get them," Jim said and disappeared for a minute while Gil used the remote to cue the movie. It was just... nice to be treated like this for once. Not to be the one having to make the effort, and to screw up. It was comforting and right and he smiled to himself as he heard Jim rustling around looking for his pills. He didn't have to do that.... but he did. That was one of the things that made it all so different.

It just seemed so easy, and it felt good to relax. Jim was back in fairly short order, dumping a small handful of pills into Gil's hand, and Gil checked it. Antibiotics, check, mild painkiller, check, something to keep the muscles of his abdomen from spasming while everything was still healing, check, and a Flintstones vitamin?

Gil cocked an eyebrow at Jim.

"It can't hurt right?" Jim said with a grin as he settled on the sofa next to him. "Don't want them to think I'm not taking good care of you."

Funny how Jim was so concerned about that. Gil took the glass of water he was presented with, swallowed half of it, and took the pills in quick succession. Except for the chewable vitamin, and Gil took care of that while he settled in again beside Jim on the sofa.

"You're doing a better job than it calls for."

Jim just looked at him a moment and half smiled as he rather deliberately put his arm around Gil's shoulders. "Always look for motive, Gil," he murmured even as he gestured for him to press play.
"As far as motives go, I've seen worse." It was easy to lean into Jim, easy just to do it without having to think, without expectations.

Easy for Gil just to press play and relax.

Jim had done the unthinkable.

He'd threatened it before, but he'd finally done it. He'd taken Gil's house key and he'd gone to Gil's apartment to get him more clothes since he was starting to move beyond living in pajamas and to bring back those talked-about photo albums.

It hadn't been as bad as he'd feared, but it was still worse than he remembered them looking. Old photographs held a certain aged quality no matter what, but Gil's collection of pictures didn't age in a dignified way.

There was no way that a picture of him at a boat party in small pink shorts, shirtless, with beer in hand, could ever be dignified.

He still wasn't entirely sure how he was going to talk Jim through them. He was kind of rehearsing excuses for half of the photographs when he realized quite suddenly he was nearly smiling over most of them. Usually it was like a physical pain to touch the albums and leaf through memories. But some of that had gone -- and maybe it was because they knew the secret.

However, he wished he'd had more warning for when Sara came by, even if Jim had said she had left a message saying she would. He might have hidden them altogether.

He might have... no, he would have taken the time to go up the steps and put them under Jim's bed. But he'd lost track of time and when the doorbell rang, he could only think enough to close the books and stack them quickly before he headed for the door. He didn't check in the peephole, which would've ticked off Jim, but he had grabbed the gun off the plant-stand, which was where Jim had left it for him.

Sara raised her hand to say hi and raised her eyebrows a little at the gun as he let her in.

"So I was on my way in, and thought I'd come and see how you were doing..." She was just launching into conversation. "Glad to see you're not taking any chances."

Gil held it up a little in vague gesture, and then put it back down on the table when he closed the door. "At Brass's insistence. It's good to see you."

"You're looking better than the last time I saw you," Sara replied taking a seat. "You seem to be moving around a lot more. That's got to be a relief."

Gil moved around the coffee table, sitting on the sofa with a comfortable amount of space between them. "It is. Everything seems to be healing up, thanks to some well-enforced rest. I could go back to work today, if I had to."

"You could?" Sara seemed to brighten a little. "Then I guess it would be okay if I talked out a few things with you? I've been working on the case and it's the first time I've gone so in-depth...?" It was phrased as a request but was really a statement.

"Ask away." After all, he was the case. No matter what Jim said about keeping his distance, he couldn't. He was the case, the victim, the one with insight, the eyewitness, all in one package. Even
"That would be good," Sara agreed absently. "So, I've been looking over the Lecter side of things? Nicky's been following the Millander leads and we think we've worked out what the staged evidence means, and how Lecter will react. To put it bluntly, Millander had to do something serious to something of Lecter's to get him to Vegas... And you had the connection with the both of them."

"I can't disagree," Gil told her as he stood up, heading for the kitchen. "Except that I had no connection to Millander as anything other than a CSI investigating a case that he came up as a possible suspect for."

"Well aside from the fact that Nicky researched his MO and every one of his victims had the same birthday as you in sequential years," Sara told him. "In fact, you and Millander were born on the same day, same year. So that would be why he started researching you. He probably was planning you as his next victim. Did you know he was pretty much reenacting his father's murder? It got thrown out because the physical evidence supported suicide over the eye witness report."

"No, I hadn't been told." It was more than they usually told victims, too, and Gil wasn't sure how he felt about that. Maybe he didn't want to know. Maybe Sara was assuming too much about his comfort level with the case, and the urge to tell her that he was sure that Millander's previous victims would feel better knowing the MO for their death was overwhelming. Gil worried his bottom lip a little, tongue playing with the stitches that hadn't fully dissolved, and pulled two mugs out of Jim's cabinet.

"So Nick's there thinking you got the closest so he's looking at something special or he's just escalating, but the motive is probably still justice. We're all pretty sure on that although Jack has some experts holding out on the homage angle," Sara continued, oblivious to his discomfort. "Having gone through the letters, we know he'll respond. Millander pretty much insulted him at every level."

"Yes, I know. I expect him to respond." By coming back, by reimposing his will, and it wouldn't take much. It could be as simple as him coming by to say hello, but they wouldn't understand that. Sara smiled. "See, I knew you would see it. Once you tipped us off about the Job passages, it looked so obvious. The problem is we can't predict where Millander is now, though Nick's working on that pretty hard so it pretty much comes down to a waiting game."

"It does," he found himself agreeing, pouring soy-milk and adding a little sugar to each mug. The more time he took, the less eye contact he had to make with her. His own mug was going to have more soy than coffee. "And we won't see him coming."

"Jack says otherwise, but I've got to admit... having studied the files, I know what you're saying." It was a little worrying that Sara seemed to think she had all the answers with regard to Lecter because she had studied evidence. Gil knew nothing prepared anyone for the real thing when it came to someone like him. She'd only touched the edges of how he could think. The saner end of the psychotic rainbow. He'd gone deeper, deeper by far, and even at his limits he had known Lecter had more unpredictability in him than could be encompassed.

Part of keeping his footing was in a willingness not to reach out and try to guess what he was going to do. But Gil could see it, could envision Hannibal paying cash for a plane ticket at the terminal, flying overseas on a first class plane, putting a rental car on a fake credit card... He could see it, a dotted line on a map of the globe. "No, Sara, you don't know. There are files and then there's reality."
"But we have an idea of what he will do," Sara insisted. "That's got to give the FBI a shot at it. There's been a lot of research on Lecter since you encountered him, Grissom. Lots of people have gone over his courses of action. I think Jack stands a chance of getting him and his missing agent back."

"Which is why he's done so well catching him until now," Gil murmured, adding the coffee to the two mugs at last. "He's had time to get himself in order. He has money in cash, he has a Visa, and there's a good chance that he's not coming to the states alone."

Sara looked at him intently. "Maybe not, but if they're ready to catch him... then they won't miss it, will they? And it would be worth the risk to get him again."

"They'll miss it," Gil sighed. "And if they don't, there's going to be a bloodbath. He kills when cornered, unconnected to his normal MO. He doesn't relish it, but anything to survive."

"So you're saying they should let him get away?" Sara said taking the coffee. She sounded startled. "I would've thought you of all people would want him behind bars."

Gil shifted, and carefully sat down. "I would prefer him to be behind bars. Sara, have you seen pictures from the scene of his first escape? Has Jack showed that to you?"

"I've seen the pictures, read the reports. I know what he did." Sara sounded so certain of her conclusions. He had used to be that way, before reality hit him. It was dangerous. It led to the same mistakes over and over. "You know I've seen some pretty intense things, Gil."

"Have you been there, Sara? No. You're being too sure of yourself, and arrogance has no place in dealing with Hannibal." He sat back, sipped at his coffee a little, and tried not to look at the closed photo albums on the table. "He'll avoid a confrontation until he's decided what he wants to do about me."

"And then what?" Sara asked. "You think he'll go after you? That's a hell of a chance to take."

"He'll wait. Set up in a hotel room or an apartment. He's patient, and he'll move when there's no risk to him." Gil looked down into his mug, and looked up for a moment. "I wouldn't even be sure to term it 'going after'."

"But what if Millander provokes him? And how would Millander provoke him?" Sara asked intently. "He seems to have studied Lecter too."

With the added advantage of understanding the insanity from the inside out.

"There's studying and then there's understanding, Sara. He can understand Lecter because they think in similar terms. He understands him," Gil said a little more firmly than he'd meant to. "If Millander provokes him, then it's a territorial war. If Millander can be caught, we can stop all of this before it turns into anything. Hannibal won't kill me."

She looked almost disappointed that. "That's what Nick was saying. He's pushing for the stake out resources to be allocated to some of his sites, but... they want Lecter."

"They'll miss the point and we'll have a bloodbath," Gil sighed, closing his eyes. "They always do. Flashy lights and a chance to put on a dog and pony show."

"You really haven't forgiven Jack, have you?" Sara asked sipping at her coffee. "I can understand why, but he was trying to protect you. He told me that."
"Of course he wouldn't tell you 'I fucked up' when he's trying to recruit you. Why don't you explain to me how he protected me, Sara? Go on." He took another sip of coffee. "This should be funny."

She looked at him. "It's not like you to sound so... bitter. You sure you're okay?"

He tilted his head a little, looking at her face. She seemed genuinely confused, and he wasn't sure what to say to her. What kind of answer was she expecting and how far from reality was that expectation? "I'm fine. But I can see you heading for the same pitfalls that I fell into, Sara, and you can do better than falling in with Jack."

"I never said I was going to really fall in with him, but I *am* good at putting things together, Griss, and I like doing it." She shrugged a little. "So tell me the pitfalls and maybe I can learn from your experience."

"You're already in them, Sara. You're approaching this like it's something in a textbook instead of someone who could and would reach out and choke the life out of you. You're thinking cut and dry, and what Jack wants to get you to do is think like one of them."

"I'm looking at the evidence -- that's what you taught me to do..." Sara replied which was a fair point. He had taught them that and it pained him to admit, there were some instances when it didn't work. Millander. Lecter... where the killer was too clever to make normal mistakes

"Which works fine for normal cases, Sara. This isn't a normal case. Think for a minute." He twisted to look at her better. "Millander is working on the premise that the evidence is wrong. They play with things like that, or have no regard for getting caught."

"But he must have some sense of avoiding capture -- considering he's done it so well."

Another trap, another pitfall. Gil knew a killer's behavior couldn't be interpreted from the standpoint of the sane. It mimicked what common sense said they should do, but critically for very different reasons. Sara was putting her judgment on his behaviors.

Now how to articulate it. Gil watched her face for a moment, and then murmured. "No, you're doing it wrong. You're approaching it like a sane human being. The reasons are different. Evidence isn't planted to avoid capture; it's planted as part of a game of wits. He doesn't avoid capture, he exists in a state where the possibility of capture is unthinkable because of a series of rituals that are part of every day life."

She frowned a little. "What do you mean? He's avoiding capture, that has to be planned."

She wasn't getting it and in having to explain it; Gil had to touch parts of his mind he had tried to cut off.

He had to explain, though, or else she was going to get into something that she didn't understand but thought she did. "No, it's not. Every morning, Hannibal goes to a cafe for breakfast. He sits down, orders something he likes, eats it. He wears gloves and before he leaves, he wipes the edge of his glass with a napkin that he takes with him. The locals think he's eccentric, but he tips well and no one cares that he takes the napkins. Eventually, they leave paper ones with his plate, and the tip stays the same. Is he avoiding capture by attending the same cafe every morning for breakfast for years on end? No. Does his wiping the glass help him? No. He exists, and he exists on terms that he's comfortable with, and anything that would aid his continued freedom which he is not comfortable with is not something that he'll do even though a sane person would suggest that he move around frequently."
"So you're saying he's evolved patterns of behavior?" Sara asked frowning slightly. "That happen to fit?"

It was a good way of putting it. Evolution of behaviors, not necessarily planned, more like... chaos theory. Order becoming apparent from chaos. It hit him like a train, that insight and he was there feeling how it worked, seeing how fragments of behavior accreted together to evolve to a successful predator. This was the Becoming Dollarhyde and Hannibal had talked about. The something new...

"They become something more," Gil went on, quiet and speaking the thoughts the moment they entered his head. "They transcend normal thought and their patterns maintain them until something or someone can break into that pattern. They hunt victims or select them carefully and wait for an opportune moment -- not to avoid being caught, but so that their greatest moment isn't interrupted, so that they don't lose what they were seeking. Could you imagine the frustration of being in the act of cutting someone open, of feeling their blood slide over your fingers, of orgasming while they breathe their last breaths, and then someone knocks on the door in the middle of it? Why risk having joy diluted because you acted too fast? Sometimes the waiting can be as exhilarating as the catch, and the longer, the more patient the wait, the better the end result."

She was staring at him as if he had changed in front of her. "I have to say I haven't imagined that, no."

And there was the problem. He had. He could taste it and he could climb inside those strange thoughts and break in when everyone else did not even see there was somewhere to get in side. A different form of evolution of thought akin to that which created Lecter, but instead had created empathic curiosity.

"Then how can you ever hope to predict what they're going to do?" Sara asked sounding concerned. It was just as well, because serial killers weren't like evidence cases. They usually became serial killers because some facet of their psychosis had them on a strategy of evasion, or cleaning evidence behind them and that made it very hard to track.

"You have to learn what drives them, get into their head, and think like them. I can tell you what Lecter is going to do, but I can't tell you when, because the concept of time doesn't matter in the way that he thinks. Care and preparation does. You understand the motivations, you understand the thoughts, and you understand what comes next and next and next." Gil stopped for a moment, and realized he was breathing a little harder than normal, too-animated, and held his breath for a moment before he took a sip of coffee to mask the heavy exhalation that brought him back together. "The evidence tells a story, it doesn't lead us to the killer unless they start to slip."

"Right." Sara seemed lost in thought a moment and then appeared to notice he was looking a little flushed. "You okay, Gil? We can stop talking if you want."

Except she'd already stirred up everything in his head, and he couldn't exactly put a full stop on it. Millander was biding his time, waiting for Lecter to reveal himself. And he wouldn't strike immediately -- if they were playing it out as a Game of Job, then there was going to be more punishment and suffering by proxy. Back and forth. Back and forth, and it was them, Sara and his friends who were going to die. Be hurt, caught in the crossfire of this great big sick puzzle.

"No, that's all right."

"Good, because I was wondering how you do that. Get to think like them," Sara asked slowly. "I'm doing my best but if what you say is true, I'm not going to get the answers in time."

"The answers don't matter right now, Sara. The only thing that matters is that Millander is caught
before Hannibal arrives." Gil closed his eyes for a moment. "I am... or was an editecker. It's a type of photographic memory. It's not something you can learn."

"So I should throw in with Nicky then, see if we can run him down?" Sara asked sounding a little annoyed by that. Not surprisingly if she as spent so much time on Lecter to be told she was never going to get it. Starling had gotten it, had gotten inside of his head and seen things from that way, had empathized with Lecter.

"That's what's going to save lives in this case, Sara." Gil rubbed at his eye, and then looked over at her. "Your life. Nick's life. All of you. Because Millander has set up a game of 'Create Job', and Hannibal won't be able to resist playing it to win back his territory. And that means attacking my friends, and if I had any locally, family. They're not going to fight it directly. They'll fight through the proxy of us."

"You in particular," Sara murmured. "There are things... in Job that could be fulfilled or have been? The ... losing family thing."

"We could make that assumption, then. I haven't had time to sit down and study Job to see where Hannibal or Millander might pick up." It wasn't really that he didn't have time, it was that he didn't want to make the time, that he didn't want to think or chase or hunt. But his mind was already gearing up for it again, now, the longer that Sara talked. And maybe it was Will coming out of a long winter's slumber, stretching and taking his place back from the piecemeal creature that had been moving his body for him.

Maybe it should've bothered Gil more that he thought that than it did.

"Well I've been reading some. Maybe it will mean more to you than it did to me." Sara looked at him again. "You never said you could do any of this before."

"I haven't done it in years. I don't do it any more. Not... actively." Not on purpose, he meant. Where was Jim? Why couldn't Jim start to unlock the front door to let himself in, and put an end to the conversation?

It was getting difficult and there was no grounding force there, no sense that it was all going to be okay that was so subtle he nearly missed it. "I guess it just seems weird after all the lectures on evidence and the holy trinity of crime scenes." Sara put her empty cup down.

"Evidence matters. Crime scenes... matter. Cases like Lecter and Millander are so few and far between, Sara. I used to spend months teaching between cases. It was slow going work. They're not... that technique doesn't apply to ninety-nine percent of what we do. Evidence does."

"I get it," Sara nodded even as there was the sound of fumbling at the door and Jim practically barged his way in with armfuls of groceries.

"Hey, Jim."

"Hey." Jim looked around at her voice and then directly at Gil, his expression shifting to a little concern as he did so. "You guys been having fun without me. huh?"

"No." He said it before he'd even finished thinking it, and gave Sara a glance that he hope seemed apologetic. "We were just discussing the case. And I managed to go through the photo album box and deemed them not yet ready for the fireplace."

"The photos, yeah. I want to look at those," Jim said. "Probably enough case talk for now, then, yeah. Anyone who wants to stop me breaking my back here would be welcome?"
Sara eventually took the hint. "Sure, Jim, here... where do you want it?"

"Over there on the table. I can pack it away easy enough." Brass wasn't giving her the option to talk about work anymore.

Brass wasn't letting her get away with it anymore, and Gil stood up, sipping at his coffee. He technically wasn't supposed to drink it yet, but there was more soy milk than coffee in his cup. Jim would forgive him. "Can I help?"

"You can help unpack, but no bending down," Jim ordered. "I mean it. Your stitches might be coming out in the next couple of days but there's no need to test them." He passed a bag to Sara to carry as he kicked the door shut.

"Fruit, huh?" Sara smirked at them both. "You have tofu or something, too."

"Don't knock the tofu," Jim mock growled.

"Healthy eating is going to be the death of him," Gil agreed, feeling a little of his good humor creeping up on him. He still felt stretched out and out of sorts, and he could only hope that that odd feeling wasn't a prelude to another fit of immobility. "Until he works that out, you can actually fry tofu."

"... you can fry it?" Jim stopped in his tracks. "Gil, you kept that quiet... Jesus, all the cholesterol I've wasted!"

Sara shook her head. "Look, I'm going to be heading in to work. You want me to pass on any messages?"

"Try to press the sheriff for a concentration of forces on finding Millander. He's not exactly a master of disguise, and if the net's wide enough, he should be catchable." And that could stop it. That could end it all, but Gil knew, Will knew, that it wouldn't work like that. Lecter was the bigger fish and the FBI did what they damn well wanted, common sense or no. They'd hardly ever listened to him most of the time, anyway.

"I'll talk to the boss. Catherine might be able to get them to listen," Sara said awkwardly patting at his arm in her version of a warm gesture of farewell. "I'm sure she'll let you know. Thanks for the advice, Gil."

"I'll send you his bill later," Jim quipped as he unpacked groceries with studied casualness.

"Goodbye, Sara. Don't let yourself get in too deep." He was holding what appeared to be 'natural' peanut butter when he said it, so Gil wasn't too sure about the effectiveness of his good wishes.

"I'll work on it," she said and raised her hand in a wave and let herself out.

As soon as the door closed, Jim almost immediately stopped unpacking and stepped over towards him. Close enough for him to hold on to, to reach into if he needed it. "Rough visit, huh?"

"That's one way of putting it," Gil murmured. The peanut butter didn't end up in the cabinet like Gil had meant it to; he managed to put it on the counter before his train of thought derailed itself, before Will-thoughts and Gil-worries mangled together, and Gil reached a hand out to clutch at Jim's arm before he leaned into him. "I think I have the scent again."

*Smell yourself, Will.*
Jim very easily and without any self-consciousness wrapped his arms around him. "I'd make a joke but I'm thinking you're serious. And this is serious."

"I don't want to understand it." Gil leaned into him, ducked his forehead down to press it against Jim's shoulder. Jim was a little shorter than him, but Gil was slouching and didn't care what it took to fold himself against the other man like that. "I explained it to Sara, and she looked at me..."

"Like you were something weird?" Jim murmured. "Which you are, but in a good way, and not because of this. It's okay, Gil, I get it, I know what you do and it's pretty much not that different than what you do with crime scenes. Or hadn't you realized that?"

He shook his head a little, concentrating on feeling Jim breath, on the faint shifts of muscle beneath his hands, beneath the fabric of Jim's shirt and jacket. "No." It wasn't the same. There was evidence and proof and meaning that held up in court, that made it possible for cases to reach court.

"No it isn't, or no you hadn't realized?" Jim replied. "No, wait, I know... you think I'm talking out my ass. It's true, I do that on occasion but when it comes to you Gil, I'm the expert. I'm not talking about crime scenes in general, I'm talking about what you do. It always amazes me, always did. You stand there and think your way into the scene. Sometimes you talk it out, sometimes you do it without talking and you just look in the right places, see the things that no one else looks for. You've got this thing that Will is a different person to Gil. You're wrong, you know that? They're both parts of the same person looked at from different angles."

"You don't know how I can think, Jim," Gil insisted. He didn't move, though. "If I said enough, you'd look at me like Sara did." Did Jim mean different angles or broken ones? He was working so hard to repress the Will-thoughts, wild things that were just there under the surface, urgings and suggestions and moods that he didn't want to deal with. Couldn't, because the few times he did let it slip everyone looked at him like he was crazy. Like he'd gone that little bit over whatever line they'd drawn for him that he couldn't figure out how to move.

"And if I told you everything I'd ever done you'd do the same. Try me," Jim said quietly. "Try this. I've probably got a bigger body count than Millander and Lecter put together. What does that make me?"

"Cop with good aim." Gil still wasn't going to lift his head, wasn't going to move until he got a cue from Jim that suggested otherwise. And he wasn't, he wasn't getting any of those cues. "Doubt you do."

"From before I became a cop. Try me, Gil. You've got to try it with someone, otherwise you're going to stay in pieces," Jim replied still holding him, moving his hands gently.

"I don't want to. I don't want to lose you." And he was scared of that, because Jim was his anchor. Jim was solid and there where Catherine asked questions and gave off a scent of vague offendedness, of suggestion that he didn't trust her. He trusted her, but she didn't understand. It was about keeping them, it wasn't about protecting himself.

It probably wasn't in the realms of normal sane logic.

"Gil, I'm going to ask you to trust me. You won't lose me. I'm difficult to get rid of." Jim replied. "I'm gonna ask you to do this for me okay? Tell me the stuff that it scares you that other people might find out."
"Everything?" He managed a laugh in the noise, and only lifted his head a little, turning his face against Jim's hair for a moment. Bland shampoo and aftershave, and it struck Gil as funny that despite Jim's age, he wasn't anywhere near as gray as Gil was. "I trust you. I just don't... know where to start."

"So what did you tell Sara?" Jim asked steadily. "Start there maybe?"

"Can we do this sitting down?"

"I thought you'd never ask. C'mon," Jim murmured shifting enough to guide them to the couch. He didn't break contact. It was as if he knew that would be disastrous somehow.

It probably wouldn't have been. He probably would have been all right, but they made it to the couch and Gil sat down, still close to Jim, arms still around him. He could breathe and concentrate and he could trust Jim. And if he couldn't trust Jim, then what was the point? "All right... I was trying to explain to her that Hannibal wasn't thinking to evade the police. That serial killers tend not to make that a goal, that it's more that they refrain from being caught not out of fear but convenience." Which was simple, but Gil could feel the right threads of the net slipping a little the more he talked.

"So I tried to get her to understand, and she didn't, she didn't understand that it wasn't fear or forethought, it was about the, the inconvenience of having your pleasure interrupted. It was the frustration of being careless and having someone walk in on you or interrupt you just when the blood is on your hands, just when the prey is breathing their last breath and you can't think of anything but how good it feels and the orgasm that goes with that interaction -- and then a door opens when you're right there, just on the edge, and you have to stop and start all over again and it's not as satisfying as the long and careful hunt of your intended prey."

Jim nodded. "Yeah. Sniper fever. Had some guys who couldn't give it up. Started shooting their own targets because it was about the hunt as much as anything. Different rules. It happens in war too. Big things become small, small things big. They have to somehow to survive. Death is more of an inconvenience than someone stealing from your pack. It's a smaller thing."

"It passes," Gil agreed quietly. He still had his eyes closed, but he lifted his head to peer at Jim, shifting so he leaned into him differently. "You do understand."

"In a different way, but yeah. I do," Jim shrugged a little and he could feel him move. "Creeps up on you and at some point you wonder how you got to be so fucked up that you can see one of your buddies blown to shit and just absently get irritated that it means you have to carry his stuff. And later? It's like having a dead leg and when you least expect it. It comes alive again and it hurts like fuck to feel it. And you know no one is going to really understand because they don't know what it's like to lose who you thought you were so easily you never noticed it go."

"Sometimes it's easier to keep that dead leg... dead," Gil murmured, stretching a probably bad metaphor out of it. Jim understood. Not the technicality of it, but the language. The patterns if not the specifics. They were on the same page, and maybe that was why Jim hadn't been treating him strangely in all of that time. He shifted, sat back a little, and loosened his grip on Jim just a little.

"Difficult to walk though," Jim said. "And you don't always get to choose it. So, you've got a part of your mind that you've been keeping dead or numb and it's coming back to life huh? The bit of you that understands the criminal mind?"

"It's more than a 'bit.'" He shifted against Jim again, and his mind drifted a little. They had to look like a sight, but Gil wasn't going to move yet. Two old not-quites, almost face to face, cheek to cheek. At least they weren't has-beens.
"I guess what I've been trying to say is that it's all you, Gil. You're not separate people or anything -- or you are, but only in the same way that you're not the same person that you were when you were younger." Jim mused a little. "Which is just as well, I was a prick when I was younger."

"I think it's a requirement to mellow with age. Maybe it kept us from getting ourselves killed." Or patterns of self protection had -- Gil couldn't be sure. He felt Jim shift and then murmured, "Jim? I think I have my knee in your hip."

"Really?" Jim moved enough so he was looking at him, leaning very close in his shifting. "Sorry about that, I..." Was very close to leaning in and kissing him, entirely by accident. Close enough for there to be that tug of attraction.

There was a perfect moment, a moment when he could have leaned forwards just a little bit. It would have been picture-perfect, movie perfect, but Gil couldn't move. He just looked back at Jim, and contemplated how much longer he had before he'd wasted the moment entirely.

Jim stayed there for a moment. "When you're ready, Gil," he murmured leaning back. "We don't just get one chance. You get old, you learn to wait for second, third and fourth chances. Or more."

It gave Gil the space to unfold his leg from where it had been not quite comfortably tucked under him. "I'm sorry. My brain was trying to come up with something witty and you completely distracted it."

"I do that." Jim said with a smile. "I have it on authority that it's damn annoying." He patted at the released leg. "But no one expects me to be anything but annoying."

"Jim..." Maybe he wasn't ready to fall back into their banter just yet, but his voice reached for chiding as he moved to sit beside Jim again. "You're not annoying."

"I have a list somewhere. Janice made it for me," the other man replied. "It's long. Long as all hell. I make a point of doing every single thing on that list as often as I can."

"Doesn't bother me," Gil shrugged. "The only time... that I think Molly was ever angry with me was when I decided that the dogs on the beach needed protection so no one got them. I spent a week building a shed for them to live in. She gave up on being angry when Kevin tried to talk her into air-conditioning it." He'd been just a baby, five years old, but he'd been smart and if they had AC then the dogs would want it, too, right?

"All things considered, I think you did better on the ex-wife and kid front," Jim said. He nodded to the photos. "That her?"

"Yeah." Somewhere in there the front cover had gotten knocked over, but Gil wasn't surprised. He'd let Jim walk him over to the sofa with his eyes closed.

Molly looked beautiful in the picture. He didn't have their wedding album because she'd taken it with her, but he had some snapshots from the impromptu honeymoon on the bay with friends. "She... was love at first sight."

"I can see why. I did that once." Jim looked at the picture. "It wasn't Janice. She's beautiful, and you must have been pretty young?"

"Nineteen. I..." Gil cleared his throat a little. He was sitting shoulder to shoulder with one of his best friends, who'd almost kissed him, discussing his ex-wife. There had to be a surreal-meter somewhere
in the vicinity that was pegging. "Got her pregnant. We both panicked once she realized it, and I told my mother, and she suggested that I do what was very obvious to her. Marry Molly. We had a justice of the peace ceremony, and Molly made her own dress. I borrowed a friend's tuxedo." He looked at the picture contemplatively, and then leaned carefully forwards to lift up the whole album so they could sit without having to lean forwards. "She's still a seamstress."

Jim picked up the picture of him in pink shorts and raised a laconic eyebrow. "A tuxedo this ain't," he commented. "So... that makes Kevin what? Sanders's age?"

"Yes." Roughly. It was strange to think of him like that, but Gil hadn't seen him in anything but pictures. "He's a forensic anthropologist, actually."

"Kinda ironic that he's in the field as well. You ever seen him? To talk to since all this?" Jim asked looking at the pictures of a young boy getting progressively older snapshot by snapshot.

"No. The only contact I have is through letters to Molly. She did it to... keep him safe." From him, from everything he drew to them. Kevin needed a safe life to grow up in. "I never asked her what she told him, but he doesn't know who I am."

"Mmm. Know that feeling. But for different reasons," Jim agreed. "If we sort this out, it would be good if you got the chance to know him."

And while part of Gil wanted to reject that notion out right, Jim made sense. Jim made sense most of the time, when his temper was in check. Gil shifted, and this time he slid his arm over Jim's shoulders. "When we sort this out. Not if. Remember that death is just an inconvenience, and not something you plan for."

"Didn't I say that?" Jim asked. "You sound like you're feeling a little better. Does this mean I can ban visits from Sara?"

"Maybe," Gil murmured seriously. "You'll have to ban me from over thinking, too. Now." He paused, and watched Jim lingering over a photograph that had Jack in it. "Do you want to hear the bad narratives for these pictures?"

"Yeah. That's why I brought them over. That and so I could laugh at your dress sense," Jim said settling back. "Some of these are going to end up blown up and scattered all over the lab, you know that?"

He made a mock motion to yank the book back with his free hand. "Not the one with the shorts, Jim. Have a little mercy..."

"Definitely the one with the shorts. Gil. I'm sorry but evidence is evidence," Jim twitched the album away. "The public has a right to know, if only for their safety."

It felt so good to laugh. So good to laugh even though it made his chest ache, that Gil didn't mind if Jim really did plan to share that picture around. He could always get suitable revenge, and for the moment, trying to wrestle the album back was more interesting.

Jim was just teasing enough to distract him, and then asking enough to get him talking. And the real surprise was that somehow the talking part was easy. All the history, all the past and loss were suddenly easy to put into words. Not always easy to hear but one thing at a time. Words after silence was the first step.
One step at a time. Jim wouldn't let him get ahead of himself, wouldn't let him miss pieces or use bad glue while he put himself back together.

Gil could trust Jim.
Time off was supposed to be relaxing.

Gil knew this, rationally, and he knew that he was healing up better than he usually did, but it didn't make him feel any less overwhelmingly lazy for relaxing like that. He really couldn't remember the last time that he'd just lain in bed after waking up, book in hand, reading.

Sometime during his dozing state Jim had taken a call that had needed him to go in as a one off. There was a limited amount of time anybody could get an airplane to stay still for a murder investigation and they needed someone from homicide there.

Jim had tried to put it off, but after Gil had prodded at him for being stupid, he'd agreed to go. As Gil had pointed out, he was only going to sleep while he was there. And surprisingly he had, because he knew Jim would be coming back, and maybe he'd make something for Jim and surprise him and it would be good.

He probably wouldn't be back for a while yet, so he had time to finish his book.

Finish the book, and then cook, and if Jim tried to be thoughtful and stopped to get something on the way home, there was a refrigerator for a reason.

Gil could feel his mind start to wander, and he shifted, to stretch out on his back. Maybe he wouldn't finish the book.

There were faint tugs where his scars were healing but they'd gone and had the stitches removed before so he was still relishing the new freedom of movement without tugging at himself if he twisted.

He yawned and then froze a moment, aware of something. Not a noise as such, more an absence of noise. Like a deliberate conscious silence as if noises were being stifled. He was filled with a sudden fear of sitting up and looking as if that would make it real somehow. It was probably nerves.

Nerves did that to him when he concentrated too hard, and the more he tried not to concentrate, the worse it got. If he let it go on for more than an hour, then he'd end up all but twitching by the time that Jim came back. And while he had sedatives that had been offered to him slyly by his physician (apparently in lieu of therapy for what had happened to him), he hadn't had to use them. Gil didn't want to use them.

So, he had to get up and take a look around.

He sat up ready to twist to the side of the bed to get out when there was a faint flicker of movement that riveted his attention.

"Oh, please don't get up, Will. You're meant to be recuperating."

The voice was as smooth and compelling as he remembered, even as Lecter stepped out of the shadows carrying, of all things, a tray complete with breakfast things on it.

It should have shocked Gil. It should have, and maybe it did on some level. Possibly part of him paused, but the rest of him shifted, sitting up instead of rolling to his feet, watching Hannibal carefully. "I believe I was."
"So I hear." Lecter brought the tray over. "I thought the least I could do was make you breakfast in bed." He sat on the bed uncomfortably close, and looking at him with the piercing blue eyes that he remembered. He looked relaxed, tanned and totally in control. "I was shocked to hear the news, Will, truly shocked. I blame myself, of course. I've become lax in looking after you."

"While I... appreciate the sentiment, I've been doing all right," Gil sat up, watching Hannibal while he could almost feel the shift of power in the room. "You need to leave. They're looking for you."

"Mm, I know. I like to give your old friend Jack just a little hope to going on with. It gives him direction and purpose in an otherwise empty and drab existence," Lecter replied with a smile, and a gleam in his sharp blue eyes that were obviously colored contacts. "But he is just an aside. I want to know who it is who thinks they can lay hands on you and issue a crude clarion call of challenge to bring me here."

His expression was just like when they had held therapy sessions. Concerned and attentive. The fact he was holding a knife in his hand that was obvious now he had put down the tray seemed to be an aside.

Seemed to be something that Gil wasn't supposed to pay attention to. That Hannibal had a knife, that there was nowhere for him to move, no recourse to protect himself. "A small time serial killer. He's trying to lay a trap, and you're playing into it right now."

"Oh, I know that." Hannibal smiled. "Sometimes life gets a little too quiet, and besides my reputation would suffer if I let an upstart best me. Besides, I am intrigued. This small time serial killer is intelligent. Intelligent enough to take you, Will..." Lecter leaned forward a little, flicking his knife to snag and cut through the cloth of Grissom's t-shirt.

He held still, very still, holding his breath. Better to lose a t-shirt than to lose his life. "Hannibal..."

"Shhh, Will..." He flicked the knife again and ripped down so the scars could be seen on his chest. "You came to me willingly. I just want to see what he did." A finger traced over the shape of the still livid scars. "Hmm."

"He's an artist." Will said that, and Will was the one who was breathing very carefully, staying almost-calm as fingers traced down over his chest. Gil was temporarily on hold.

"Hence the efforts to imply crudity," Hannibal looked at him directly, his fingers still tracing over the scar lines possessively. "A dragon... hmm? But not one of revelation and with the eyes of an owl. Ah, he is casting you as Job, the afflicted pawn in the grasp of God and the Devil." He actually laughed a little at that, still watching him, leaning too close for comfort. "A simple but elegant message. A little overwrought and lacking in true instinctive feeling but interesting nonetheless, don't you think, Will?"

"Not really. I found the whole thing unappealing," Gil deadpanned. Calm. As long as he thought about being calm, he'd be calm. He could pretend that Lecter wasn't smiling at him like that.

"I'm sure you did. I thought the shit dessert was a little over done, but I suppose he was making a point," Hannibal said, he finger dipping lower over his abdomen. "I certainly got the message almost immediately. A shame, really, because I suspect we would have been compatible under other circumstances. Like we were, Will. Say what you like, but there are times when sleeping with a woman just isn't the same."
"You'd be disappointed by Millander's transgenderism if that's the problem," Gil murmured. Move it from him, back to Lecter's soon to be target.

He smiled at him as if he had performed a clever trick. "Best of both worlds then," he commented. "A personality at war with itself. That could be interesting. You've changed, Will. There was a time you would have been working this from a hospital bed."

"I've been prevented from doing that this time. But I still understand what's going on. The Job reference was an apt one, wasn't it? He did his research," Gil noted. It would have passed for normal calm conversation if his shirt hadn't just been cut open, if Lecter hadn't been leaning over him to trace fresh scars that were still scabbed here and there.

"Indeed. I believe he will pursue that reference through to the bitter end." Lecter smiled at him. "Killers tend to be a little entranced with their own cleverness. We worked on that together. It's the power that comes with life and death." He was leaning closer again. "You are not his, Will, you remember that."

"It had never crossed my mind that I was." Just like it hadn't passed through Lecter's mind that Gil wasn't in his own house, that he was staying with someone else. Maybe even with someone else, except every other place Gil looked had luggage with his stuff in it. It seemed very transient. "Are you entranced with your own cleverness? You don't have to prove anything to him."

Lecter smiled. "Good, Will. It took a little while for you to take that bait but you did. You haven't forgotten everything I taught you. You should know that I have no need to be entranced by myself. I need no self-aggrandizement. I am what others of my ilk hope to... become. I'm sure you understand." He sat back a little, removing his hand from Grissom's skin.

"I understand." Gil took the moment to sit up more, conveniently putting space between them. "Mimicry is just that. There is only one you."

"Correct. Whereas you? There are two of you at the moment. You should do something about that. Get some therapy perhaps..." Hannibal smiled with a gleam of white teeth. "You know, I could stoop to this Millander's level and 'mark my territory', but there are far less damaging ways to do that." He stood again. "I think I will leave you to your breakfast, Will. You need to keep your strength up."

He wasn't going to touch it, but he watched Hannibal stand, and he watched Lecter watching him. "I appreciate your concern."

"I'm sure you'll appreciate it a great deal more soon." Lecter turned and walked over to the top of the stairs. "Don't worry, I'll let myself out. That redhead of yours showed me exactly where you were. She looks tired, Will. She must have been distracted not to notice me following her. Pass on my compliments and I'll be seeing you again soon. Remember, Will, Job had faith in his God."

"I have faith in mine." Never mind that it wasn't Lecter. He could think whatever he liked. Gil could only concentrate on breathing in that moment. Catherine. He'd followed Catherine, probably from the department.

Hannibal smiled at him and disappeared down the stairs. Gil didn't hear the door go, or any obvious movement to show that he had left but he was frozen where he was. With a gift breakfast from a serial killer.

A gift breakfast that wasn't a breakfast. It was a message. The only meals he'd eaten with Lecter that had been safe were ones they'd worked on together. There would be a story or a warning, or part of
a victim in that tray. Gil didn't want to move yet

He wasn't sure if he could. Hannibal had just strolled in as he had predicted, effortless in his ability to get where he wanted. To his bedroom. If Jim had been there... God. No, he'd probably wait until he knew he would be alone but if Jim had been there... well, he couldn't think of anyone who might annoy Lecter more than Brass.

It was that which spurred Gil to action, because he could imagine, vividly, Jim's body on the front lawn, maybe arranged behind the bushes, dead from moments after stepping out of the house. It was a horrifying thought, but it made Gil get to his feet, fumbling for the phone Jim kept on the bedside stand. The side that he slept on, which implied that he'd muscled into Jim's side of the bed.

He heard the phone ring after he'd fumbled for the speed dial and each ring felt like forever until there was a curt response of "Brass."

"Jim, you're still alive." There was a pause because Gil needed to gather his brains back together before he blurted anything else out that sounded spectacularly stupid. Of course he was still alive. He was there, wasn't he? Answering the phone.

"Uh, yeah. At least I was the last time I looked." Brass was automatically softening his tone, he could tell that. "Some reason why I shouldn't be? Or are you picking up on the fact that dealing with a plane full of witness makes me want to end it all?"

"No. I was just... worried. Uh..." Gil wandered a little with the phone, and shrugged out of his cut open t-shirt. Hannibal had nicked him a little, and he hadn't even noticed it at the time. Accidental, probably. "Lecter was just here."


"Do that. He said he found me by following Catherine. The department needs to pull the parking lot surveillance tapes. He's changed his face a little, but not much."

"I'm coming back." Jim said that decisively. "Vega can take statements here. You okay? Did he do anything to you?"

"Not really." Just cut him, because by then, fuck, what did it matter? It was a cat-scratch among real knife wounds. "He wanted to see Millander's handy work. I'm fine, Jim. Just... be careful when you come in. He might still be outside. I don't know."

"Sit tight. We'll make sure the place is clear. I'll borrow Nick to process -- the others have to finish up this flight murder business," Jim replied. "Be there soon, Gil. As soon as I can."

He rang off, and Gil could imagine him creating havoc wherever he was to get things done fast, to get there faster.

Sit tight was actually fairly explicit for Gil, a general instruction for him to follow while he waited for them to arrive. He hung up the phone, and tried to reign in the feeling of being a little lost. The cut t-shirt ended up on the spot on the mattress where he'd been sitting, and it was easy to head to an open suitcase to grab another shirt to put on. Something dark.

The nagging feeling that Lecter might still be down there, still waiting worried him. What if he was going to announce his presence to Millander by killing someone? Jim maybe. Or... he'd followed
Catherine. What if he was going after her? Or Nick, Warrick, Sara... anyone?

No, he had to think about this. Lecter had given him information in their conversation; he just had to think about it.

He just had to get his head together and calm down and breathe, and not give in to the Will-urges that stretched him between two equally unhelpful extremes, panic and trying to clear the house himself. Gil could imagine Will sitting down against the wall, cradling his head in hands, gun in one hand, and as satisfying as that would have been, as calming as that might've been, Gil wasn't going to. Couldn't let himself.

Lecter had said something about him being two personalities and he was damned if he was going to let himself be ruled by the useless parts of either. He was Will Graham and Gil Grissom. Will Graham could be rash and impulsive, prone to being overwhelmed by emotion. Gil Grissom was more logical, thought things through but sometimes didn't react enough on instinct. If he could just balance the two...

Lecter would expect him to react like Will. Will was who he knew, but he had changed since then and being Gil was a hard habit to break. No panicking, preserve the evidence in situ so no dramatic movements. He left the tray where it was untouched. He looked at the glass that appeared to be apple juice and frowned. They didn't have apple juice in the house. Jim had bought orange and pineapple, not apple and it was neither of those.

He sniffed at it cautiously and wrinkled his nose a little at the stench of urine. Great.

Just great.

He was going to leave all of that alone. There was bacon, but it didn't look like the turkey bacon Jim had, and there was a sick possibility that it was human. Everything else he could look at later. Let Nick or whoever Jim brought look at. There was probably a gun somewhere in the room, and he could take it with him while he went to see if there was anything out in the hallway.

Jim made sure there was a gun with him. It hadn't helped with Lecter being there, but a sudden lunge for a weapon would have triggered Hannibal in the same way that the fluttering of chickens in a hen house made a fox pounce until there was no more movement. There were reasons why freezing was a valid panic response after all. He reached for the gun in the drawer and padded slowly to the stairs, listening so hard it was like he was trying to visualize in some sort of sonar echo if there was anyone still down there.

Silence.

Not false silence, but the silence before Jim's AC clicked on, the silence of a house that was devoid of everything but him.

The house was his.

Gil didn't lower the gun, and he carefully pushed open doorways as he walked.

Logical, he was logical. Hannibal came to alert them to his presence. He didn't want to kill him personally because he'd had his chance but he had implied he was willing to play the game Millander set up and to beat him at it.

The living room and kitchens was clear, the bathroom and guest bedroom.
Almost insolently obvious, a window at the back was flapping open, the glass part removed by professional means. Some sort of cutter which would have been silent and easy to do. Hannibal definitely wanted them to know he was here. He wanted the word to get out, to make it to Millander.

It would, too. And now Jim's house was going to be a crime-scene, which was a kind of intrusion that no one appreciated. Gil wasn't sure how he'd missed Lecter setting up 'breakfast', but he had, and he was sure that he'd be asked. And he couldn't lie and say he'd been in the guest bedroom, because he hadn't.

It was going to be pretty obvious to any CSI with half an eye that he'd been sleeping in Jim's bed and most of his CSI's had the full two. Catherine already knew of course. But he didn't really care about that. Not really.

He could hear sirens and the screech of cars pulling up too quickly. The cavalry arriving he had no doubt. Jesus, he hoped Jim would be there soon.

He headed towards the living room and the front door, waiting for a knock or a sign that he should open it. No sudden movements, he'd been in that position before.

They don't bother to knock. The door was forced open and there is a sudden baffling swarm of FBI and Vegas police pouring in, pushing into Jim's home and shouting at him to put down the weapon and spilling into every room like a tidal wave.

Gil set the gun down, clicked the safety into place, and dropped it on the floor, standing stock still while the people 'came in'. He was glad that he hadn't decided to stand behind the door, or else he would've been under it. If that happened, he could fully imagine his health insurance trying to drop him, because how else could one explain that many boot-print shaped injuries except as negligence and stupidity?

"Place is clear..." Announced one of the FBI agents and Gil had to suppress a groan when he saw Jack come in. Of all the people to be on quick response...

"He was here?" Jack said without preamble. "Lecter was here? When... how long ago?"

"About a minute before I called Captain Brass." Not 'Jim', but Brass, so at least the locals would know who he was talking about and whose house they were in. He concentrated on staying still, and wondering when Jack had rolled back into town. "Maybe less."

"Search the area -- carefully!" he addressed the agents waiting. "He could still be close. Move!"

Just like Jack to react like that. Lecter wouldn't be there, he'd know how they worked. The agents spilled out again leaving them in the house. "He hurt you?" Jack asked a little belatedly. "What did he do?"

"Talked, left a buffet of clues upstairs. There's a cup of urine that he tried to pass off as apple juice. I'm fine." It was easy to fall back a little, into Will, while he dealt calmly with Jack. Maybe he could work on cobbling together the two sides.

"What did he say, what was he sounding like he was going to do?" Jack pressed again wanting answers, any answers. "Threats?"

"He wants to play Millander's game. No threats. Lecter doesn't need to threaten me," Gil pointed out, looking past Jim and towards the knocked down door. "Can we get that put back up? This isn't my
"No, it's Captain Brass's, I believe," Jack replied. "I wondered where you had gone to hide out. And I thought he was lying when he told the nurses you were together. Never thought he would be your type, Will."

"I like smart people with good hearts. That's not a very explicit type, Jack." Gil kept looking at the door. "But, really. Can we get that put back up or is that going to have to wait until CSI shows up?"

"We'll get it put up. Looks like he came in the back window anyway," Jack said. He turned and looked as there were other movements outside and the sound of someone running up the steps.

"Gil?" Brass was there at the doorway.

Looking awkward and unsure of what to do, who to hit, maybe, but Gil stepped forward and over the knocked down door, away from Jack. "Jim -- I'm sorry about the door, the Feds didn't knock."

"Hell, I can get a new one out of them," Jim walked over barely noticing the state of the door. "What did he do to you? You okay?"

It looked all the world like he was just going to take hold of him there and then in front of the Feds and their own Vegas police.

Gil wouldn't have cared if he did. He stopped moving and let Jim head towards him, even as he shot Jack a glance. "I'm fine. He just showed up for breakfast and conversation. He wanted to see Millander's handiwork."

Jim did put his hand on his shoulder, only just stopping short of embracing him. Close enough that Grissom could feel the tug that meant he knew Jim would've under other circumstances. "That's a different shirt -- you sure you're okay?"

Nick was heading in behind them. "You ready for me in here?" He sounded relieved just to be able to see Grissom there, standing and seemingly unharmed.

"I'm fine. He just... cut my shirt off. I left it upstairs. There's a breakfast tray full of evidence. Nicky? Up the stairs, room at the end of the hall." It was all right that he swayed into Jim just a little. He'd done all right. He hadn't panicked and he hadn't freaked, and he hadn't yet reacted to Lecter being there.

"Gotcha," Nick nodded and headed upstairs, and Gil knew he would be processing the scene and he would do a good job. Nick always did a good job and Lecter had left things for him to find and...

Somehow Jim had put an arm around him and had him half sitting on the couch. "Stay with me Gil. You want me to do your statement? We can find a hotel or something tonight until they clear the house."

"Probably a good idea," he heard Jack saying. He'd drifted off for the part where Jim had somehow gotten him over to the sofa, but it hadn't seemed like he'd done it. "Since if he was in the kitchen we'll have to go over the place top to bottom. Why don't you get him outside? Fresh air used to help."

Jim looked a little like he didn't want to take any suggestion that Jack might make but he nodded. "C'mon, Gil, let's go outside a moment. Let them do what you usually do." He was drawn and lead
gently away from the chaos that was going on.

There was still chaos outside, and Jim's neighbors were probably going to think they were all crazy. Gil could see people peeking out of the windows, probably wondering what all of the excitement was that late at night. It was dark outside except for the flashing of red and blue lights, and cool, which did help.

Jim took them to a spot which looked suspiciously like he knew no one could see it and then he did turn Gil into his arms properly. "You know, phoning me and telling me a serial killer has been to visit doesn't do much for my blood pressure," he murmured.

"Sorry." Gil leaned into him, and maybe he was shaking a little. Just maybe. It didn't matter, because he'd done all right. He'd done a good job and he hadn't freaked out and he hadn't... hadn't. Needed to stop thinking. "I thought you might appreciate it more than me calling 911 and you figuring it out when you came back."

"Damn right," Jim said and exhaled a breath that sounded shaky in itself. "Gil..." It was enough to get his attention and that in turn was enough for Jim to lean forward matter-of-factly and kiss him.

Not really the ideal first time, Gil decided. He was standing barefoot on the lawn in his pajamas with Jim, and it was cold outside, and he'd dropped Jim's spare gun on the floor back in the house, and his mind was still going and going when he wanted it to stop. When he wanted to, and finally did just lean into Jim, feeling the pressure of lips against his own before he tilted his head a little for better pressure, felt Jim's lips part a little.

It took a moment before the sensation of the kiss started to blank out the frantic tail-chasing in his mind. His attention narrowed and things like the barefoot aspect dissolved away as there was heat there, spreading from lip to lip, mouth to mouth. Somewhere in his life Brass had learned to kiss properly, giving enough, pressing enough, letting it unfurl without crushing the sensation with eagerness. Somewhere in the proceedings, the kiss took over.

Gil and all of the scattered bits of him were okay with that. When he pulled back finally, it was just to lean into Jim again, turning his face into Jim's hair. He strangely smelled like airline peanuts, and it made Gil want to smile. "Thanks. That was better than slapping me."

"Well y'know, it seemed like the thing..." Jim cleared his throat, seemingly at a loss now they had actually kissed. "Look, I'm going to take you to yours, pick up a few things from there then get us booked in somewhere. I'd say we'd stay at your place, but the press is still hanging around. Hopefully we can get in and out quick. I'll do your statement when we're somewhere safe."

It was obvious he was equating safe with 'in the company of me'.

"Are you allowed to take my statement?" Gil asked, knowing he still sounded a little disjointed.

"I will be." Jim said and it didn't look like he would take no for an answer no matter what protocol he trampled on. "C'mon, let's go to my car. It's cold out here and frankly, I want you as far away from the three ring circus as possible."

He was fine with that. Before media showed up and someone outside of their circle realized Gil Grissom was Will Graham fifteen years later. He didn't want any more pictures of him dazed or hurt making it into tabloids. "Okay."

It was easy to let Jim pull him back to his car. It was even easy to sit there while Jim jogged back up
to the house, presumably to tell Jack what he was doing. It didn't take him long and Gil wondered if Jack was just as glad to see Brass out of the picture as Jim was to be away from him.

Probably.

Jim got back in the car. "Okay, we're out of here," he said getting in and shutting the door. "Just talked to Catherine, and she's getting us into the Rampart. I'll go in when we make it to your place, okay? Just in case."

In case Lecter or Millander had figured that as a next move.

"It might be safer if there're two of us," Gil reasoned, leaning his head back against the headrest. He was really glad that Jim was driving. "When did you talk to Catherine?" Had he been gone that long?

"When I went inside. She called so I asked her where would be the best place to try for a free room and she said she'd talk to Sam and get us a place at the Rampart." Jim looked at him as he turned the ignition. "She was worried about you and I... told her to be careful. I haven't told her that she was the one Lecter was following, but Jack was talking about it so loud in the background she might have picked it up." He grimaced a little at that.

"Jack's just doing his job." And pissing people off. Jack could multitask better than Greg could that way. "It'll be all right, Jim."

"He's still an asshole though," Jim said with finality. "And I thought we'd beat this before he got here. I thought I'd be there if he came calling. I'm sorry, Gil, I really am."

"That Jack's an asshole?" It was all right that he dodged the question for a moment. "He's always been one. Some of us joked that he came out of the womb one." Non-sequitor, sure, but Jim had that moment where he seemed to be weighing whether to continue on that topic or help Gil back step his mind again, and it gave Gil the time he needed to come up with a more coherent answer. "No, don't worry. What did you think we'd... beat before he showed up? The case?"

"Nicky thought he had a lead on Millander. It hasn't dead ended yet so..." Jim sighed a little. "But late now. I've got a feeling things are gonna get a little wild. Maybe you should be in the lab or something, Gil. Not working the case or anything, but for protection. Or we can skip town... but from what I understand, that's not going to work, is it?"

"I'd feel better if everyone else skipped town." Gil looked over at Jim instead of the road, relaxing like that. "It's too late. Lecter wants to play the game."

"I would've thought the smart thing would be not to play the game set up by someone else. We're not talking a friendly chess competition here," Jim replied thoughtfully. "So Millander's set the board and Lecter's sat at the table. And what? Their playing on a chessboard of CSI and everyone involved in this?"

"Exactly. They'll play through the story of Job." Gil kept watching Jim, even though Jim's eyes were on the road. "He told me to have faith in my god."

Jim groaned. "Meaning him right? I swear, the moment I see the guy, I'm just going to shoot him." Jim looked worried in the lights from oncoming traffic. "So what's in Job? What are they likely to do? And when?"
"I can't remember. I haven't sat down and studied it, I only read over it cursorily," Gil murmured. He should've been able to do better than that. "Either I work the case or I don't. I can't do both. I can't start and just stop."

"Sorry. Sorry, Gil... I didn't mean to..." Jim sighed. "I guess we're all used to you having the answers as Will or Gil, huh? You don't have to, you're not working the case unless you're ready. I've made that clear to Crawford and then I just do the sort of thing he would do and try and get you answering questions! Last thing you need right now."

They weren't far from Grissom's place. It would be strange to see it after such a long time away, even if he wasn't going inside.

Two weeks away was a long time. "I'm used to having the answers. Maybe I should work it anyway."

Jim glanced at him. "Gil, I'm serious about this. You only work the case if you feel you can. I wasn't going to let Crawford push it when you were in hospital and nothing's changed now."

He pulled up outside Grissom's place and stopped the car. "Don't make a rash decision on this, Gil."

"And when something happens to all of you, would it be a rash decision then? Should I wait for it to be too late for one of you?" He didn't feel like he could work the case, but could he not work it?

"Gil, we know the risks, all of us. We're working on it. This is about them, not you okay?" Jim replied. "Anything that is going on is because of them. Last thing you need to do is accept responsibility for what they do."

"That would be a cold comfort at your funeral, Jim."

He shouldn't have said it, but Jim might as well start to understand the meaning of what they were going to do.

Jim looked at him. "I'd rather risk that than risk your mind," he said seriously.

Gil had a horrible suspicion that Jim actually meant that, which was just... staggering. Before, with Jack, it had been everyone else's lives that were important enough to sacrifice the battered psyche of Will Graham to try and save. The fact that someone might say no, his mind and well-being was more important, was very surprising.

"I wouldn't." He put Jim before that, he'd put any of his friends before that. Maybe some strangers. It was hard to gauge what triggered it and what didn't.

"Guess we're deadlocked then," Jim murmured. He unbuckled his seat belt. "You choose it, Gil, and I'm there with you, okay? If you don't, I'm still there with you. You think about it while I get a few things."

With that, he was out of the car, striding up to the house and he could see him reaching for his gun as he got the keys and went inside.

Tricky question. Could he do it again? Should he?

No, the should wasn't too negotiable. He had a family in Vegas now, people he had to protect now that Will had already been burned and learned the lesson about family first. Family first, or they were lost when he wasn't looking, and he didn't want to lose any of them. Permanently or otherwise.
Could he... yes. He just had to stop fighting it. It came to him naturally, along with everything else, and Jim would have to help him out there. 'Everything else' could run him ragged, and there had to be someone there to pull him back from the edge.

In a couple of weeks Jim seemed to have moved pretty effortlessly into that position -- he wasn't sure how exactly, but he was glad he was there. Because tonight he knew that if he went to pieces, there would be someone there holding him. If he had nightmares and lashed out, he'd take that, too, and if he wanted someone to understand how he got into people's heads, into that darkness, he was there for that too.

That was more than he'd ever dreamed he'd have ever again. The kiss was an unexpected bonus.

Cath knew more than she ever let on, Jim decided. The room that had been booked for them both had been one of the honeymoon suites, which he guessed had been Catherine's sense of humor. One bed, hot tub and better than average everything. Jim had made Grissom relax a little in the tub and having found that Catherine had wangled some way of Sam Braun picking up the tab, he'd insisted on splurging out on room service.

Currently they were half sitting, half lying on the bed surrounded by food -- healthy and unhealthy -- that they had been eating on and off for some time.

And somehow he was meant to put the fact that Hannibal Lecter had broken into his home and been close enough to touch Grissom's skin without anything or anyone stopping him into perspective. The statement had been pretty difficult to take after all.

Grissom hadn't stopped him, but he understood that. He understood why Gil hadn't moved, had probably gone as still as a deer when a branch snapped. But still. How was he, Jim, just supposed to be okay with that? Like Gil didn't mind being the psycho's territory.

Gil was chewing on his pen a little as he looked over a notebook full of scribbles that he'd written down. It looked like brainstorming, but Jim was trying hard not to read over his shoulder. Yet. After the shower Gil had gone for the Bible in the dresser drawer. It was kinda incongruous of Vegas to still put one of them in every room, but hey.

No prizes for guessing what he was reading, or brainstorming. Job in all its verses. He guessed he should be reading it, too, but one of them needed to be rooted in sanity. If this counted as sanity.

He didn't want Gil to be doing this, it seemed too much like Crawford had finally won with his, 'Only Will can do this, only he can work it out'. Dammit, Sara, Nick, Warrick, Catherine, they'd been working it out. They'd done better than Crawford's own people.

And maybe Crawford had won out. It was hard to tell, and Gil had been insistent that Jim not tell the others he was working it just yet, that he was trying to figure it out. He insisted that he needed to know to ground himself and keep himself safe.

Jim wasn't buying it, but he could watch Gil. It seemed like Gil was submitting himself to supervision, stopping to nibble on food when Jim left the room.

There were reasons why he played the slow muscle for brains cop compared to Gil, and it was because he'd recognized in Gil the sort of mind that was rare almost from the moment he met him. Something bright and slightly breathtaking if a man wasn't the type to get competitive or jealous. Jim
knew he wasn't. He had a different form of intelligence, and in his own way he'd been good at it considering he came from homicide to CSI. He'd adapted and twisted things at angles the other were a little too sheltered to think about.

Except for Gil. But what Gil was doing now wasn't something he could do. He understood it, but it took a talent to go beyond the normal extremes of human emotion. He could talk his way through a suspect's interrogation, making plausible futures from bits of evidence, but Millander and Lecter were too far out for him to chase.

He hated the fact that there was a little truth to what Jack had said. Not everyone could do what Will Graham had done. But in his head, that was all the more point not to break what the FBI had once had.

Gil needed not to be encouraged to do it, and Gil needed to be protected when he did it on his own terms. Gil shifted, and leaned back, lay on his back, head close to Jim's thigh. He held the notepad in his hands, exhaling slowly. "Jim?"

"Mmmhmm?" He automatically reached down to stroke at Gil's hair. It was funny how that habit had come out of nowhere. He couldn't even write it off as hair envy; it was more the feel of it over his fingers.

Gil's hair was close to going completely gray, and it shifted colors pretty often, often enough that Jim had a sneaking suspicion that it wasn't the light, it was some kind of hair dye that Gil played with. He wasn't sure, but he figured he'd find out, since all the picture of Will Graham had shown him going gray then, when he was just a kid. But it was thick and a little wild and curly, felt good in his fingers. "Just need to take a break. And you need to call everyone at the lab and make sure they have fresh batteries in their smoke detectors."

"Sure. They're going to ask me why though, you know that?" Jim replied and stroked him again for a moment, just insanely grateful he was able to do that and Lecter hadn't left him half gutted on his stairs.

It was just his luck to start making progress with his life only to get the carpet pulled out from under him. He wasn't sure what was going on, or where it was going. But Gil wasn't saying no to those little things, and he seemed comfortable. "Fire is a factor. I just can't tell when. It depends on what roles they settle into as they both play god."

"I thought it was God versus the Devil, the big prizefight," Jim mused aloud. Fire, great. A bomb at the lab maybe? It was a possibility. He could do something about that. Was it just the lab that was at risk or each of them individually? He'd definitely look into sorting out his place.

"It's god versus the devil, through the actor of Job, his life, his family. And they both think that they're God." Gil closed his eyes, and paid the pad on his chest so Jim couldn't read it. "And my mother wonders why I don't believe in a god who tells me how to live my life."

"Yeah well, if I was looking for lessons from Job, I think I'd come away with the message that both sides play games and you're screwed no matter who's on your side." Jim said with a cynical smirk. "So you might as well do what you think is best." His fingers smoothed over Gil's forehead absently.

"I'm on my own side. I'm not supposed to be. Loose canon." Gil's eyes closed a little, lazy and stressed around the edges. "But bias helps no one."

He was probably meant to understand that, but he was too busy thinking of ways to keep them all safe. "Guess not," he replied vaguely, his fingers still rubbing gently. "You need to put it down and
It wasn't even something he was giving much thought to but if Gil liked it...

"I used to drink to try and blot it out," he found himself saying conversationally. "Close to those weekly meetings once. Before Vegas."

"Yeah, I figured. Self-medicating," Gil murmured. Accepted it just like that, because hey, what was a little alcoholism and Jim having to monitor his drinking because of coming that close to the brink. "Never liked it much. Social drinking is all right."

"It's when you drink to hide something when it gets to be a problem." He wasn't entirely sure but there had been once or twice when he'd seen a certain look in Sidle that made him wonder. But nothing solid yet and he didn't cry wolf unless he'd seen the white of teeth snapping a lot closer than a suspicion. "Never been tempted in it, even with all this sort of stuff, then?"

It seemed a logical way to drown out voices in the head to him.

"No. Molly always stopped me. There's always been someone to stop me. Used to smoke like a chimney. I'll probably die of lung cancer in ten years and everyone but Jack will be surprised." Gil's mouth twitched a little. "You can light them off each other, you know? But I think you lose about an eighth getting it done."

Jim shook his head. "Nah, you won't," he murmured easily as if he could see the future. "I smoked when I was drafted, but it was probably dried shit in a bit of wax paper. It was just something to do then." Every moment then had been surreal in its own way.

"This was a need. I had them squirreled away in desks and lockers and car glove compartments, jackets, pockets... Jack used to carry a pack of his and a pack of mine." Gil tilted his head a little, and peered up at Jim. "Weren't the cigarettes given out to raise morale? Somehow I doubt it worked."

"Morale?" Jim smiled a little and shook his head. "We were all batshit crazy then. We were the ones that survived, so we had to be. Anyone logical, or with common sense got killed."

"Except you," Gil mused quietly. Jim wasn't sure where the conversation was going, but it seemed to be soothing Gil a little. That had to be good, right? Right.

"Nah, I'm firmly in the batshit crazy camp," Jim said, and half-smiled. "I remember once getting caught literally with my pants down. That'll give you a complex, bullets flying when you've got your underwear around your ankles. Mind you, it was tripping flat on my face that saved my life."

"And they didn't shoot it off." Gil was still watching him, and then he closed his eyes again and sighed quietly, an almost happy sigh. Puppies didn't sound that happy unless there was food involved. "Maybe crazy is the new sane."

Brass chuckled. "Yeah. You don't think some of the things people do and it isn't even illegal just a little bit crazy? We've seen enough weird uh... forms of personal enjoyment to make us look pretty damn dull. You wouldn't need CSI for my love life, you'd need a team of archeologists."

"Why?" Eyes still closed, Gil managed to seem intent even though his voice was slow and contemplative.
He stroked over the skin of his forehead again, slowly feeling the texture under his fingers tips.
Frown lines smoothing out with each touch. "Because that's how little action I get. You and me. Last time.
Unless I tamper with the dig site myself..." He smirked at the analogy.

"That's not bad. That was the last time that I... meant to do it." He frowned, but that was just more
lines for Jim to smooth with his fingers, the pad of his thumb. "I've done the exciting. It's not."

"I wish I'd known you meant to do it," Jim said, closing his own eyes a moment. He could remember
snippets of that night, impressions of really good sensation, of not wanting to stop and not having to.
Of skin under his fingers and hair damped a little with perspiration.

"Yeah. Never said we weren't both screwups, Jim." Gil shifted his shoulders a little, and one hand
drifted to rest on Jim's knee. "Never said we can't do it again, either."

"Something to look forward to," Jim murmured. "When you're ready, though. You got that? I can't
ask you, Gil. I won't ask you. I'm not even going to try reading between the lines because I totally
fucked up doing that last time. You want us to do anything, you just ask. Tell me what you think,
because even that kiss earlier surprised the hell out of you."

"Jim, I don't even know how we got outside. Everything surprised the hell out of me," Gil smirked
faintly, looking up at Jim. "I couldn't stop thinking."

"Neither could I. Just thinking of all the things I could've come home to," Jim replied looking down
at him. "It was too damn easy for him."

Something passed over Gil's eyes for a moment, and then it was gone -- a shadow, something that
Gil probably needed to explain but wouldn't. "And think about it. He's older than us. I'd have trouble
getting through that window."

"He had the kit to do a silent break and entry, I saw that just from the window itself," Jim replied.
"You okay?"

He just wished Gil would tell him anything he needed to get off his chest. Out of his head. He wasn't
much good as a counselor or shrink but he could listen.

"Every time I try to stop thinking, my brain conjures up something new." But he seemed coherent,
and he seemed to be with Jim, talking, so it wasn't that bad yet. "Distract me?"

"With what?" Jim asked. "I can't sing, I can't dance..." He grinned a little at that. "You want me to
talk about something? What would you like?"

He was pretty much game for anything, and Gil seemed to like the idea a little. His eyes seemed a
little less shadowed, and he finally laid the notebook aside, face-down on the mattress. His other
hand was still on Jim's knee, head still close enough to Jim's thigh that it might as well have been in
his lap. "Anything."

"Well give me a clue here," Jim replied. He wondered if he should succumb to the temptation to
direct Gil to lying in his lap. "I've told you more about me than pretty much anyone knows."

"This is true. I don't know what to ask, though. I don't like to pry," Gil was still peering up at him,
seemingly comfortable. "Anything. Something stupid or funny. Please."

"You don't like to pry huh?" Jim chuckled to himself and contented himself with stroking Gil's hair
again. "Stupid... I've done some stupid things in my time." It was difficult to choose one.
"We all have. Just... Something mindless," Gil murmured. "I could come up with so many."

"I could come up with a few of yours, but I'm trying to think of something you might not have heard," Jim said. "Okay, this is going back a while, not long after I started in Homicide in Jersey you know? Being a cop was a good step for someone who comes back from Asia and it felt familiar enough that I settled right in. So we were on this case. Called in for a DB on Halloween -- yeah, there's always one. The call comes through for a grave yard so we're figuring its some sort of prank... yeah, yeah, DB in a cemetery adolescent humor you know? So they send me out with this guy called Leo -- and Leo thinks he's the coolest cop this side of the world you know? You can see where it's going -- some of the old hands doing the equivalent of a hazing. And I thought I knew it so I was playing it like every cool cop show you've ever seen."

Jim smiled and shook his head at the memory of himself. "I was a prize idiot but it made me look good. Because there was Leo jittering like crazy when we got there because it looks like the team of cops have been carried off or something. You wouldn't have fallen for it Gil, not enough evidence. Anyway, thinking I smelled a set up I suggested we split up and I was pretty confident the guys would go after Leo, you know? And I could join in the laughs and everything would be cool. So we split and I creep around the cemetery trying to get behind where the other department guys are hanging out, or where I think they are."

"And?" Gil pressed, still watching Jim. Like it was the best story ever and he'd never heard anything so interesting in his life. That was intense attention.

A little too intense, but hey, if it worked it worked."

"And I hear something that sounds a little like Leo losing his cool and I smirk a bit and I sneak forward and then I see this figure lying over one of the graves and I think... Oh right, here we go. Walked right into it. By now, I'm sure enough that I think I recognize the fake DB as Rollins, one of the guys who called it in. So I think right... I'll be cool, I'll go over act scared and then I'll bend down and give the guy a kiss on the forehead or something because he was a notorious homophobe and he'd freak and then the joke would be on him. So I follow according to plan rush over acting for an Oscar, bend down, lean in and kiss the guy... And then I realize the skin is cold, and..." Jim shuddered. "Dead. Really dead. I shrieked like a wuss, and if you want to know how I came to be freaked out by the touch of dead bodies it was then. And the joke backfired on all of us. Turned out that they had done exactly what I thought, but a little way over, a guy had chosen that night to commit suicide on his lovers' grave. And then I got to explain how it was my saliva got to be on the corpse. I think they allowed me to write it off as a panic attempted kiss of life."

Gil laughed quietly, smirking to himself. "I wondered about that, Jim. So they had planned to get you in a joke?"

"Oh yeah, shake up the rookies. That whole, 'you'll never believe what happens on the street' shit," Jim replied, pleased Gil had been mildly amused. "You name it the Jersey department did it all -- it was pretty slipshod back then. Forensics was basic at best. I worked my way in and then later? Took the whole damn place apart."

"Did that feel good?" Gil murmured quietly. There was something not entirely comfortable in his voice while he talked, in the way that he closed his eyes a little. "Taking them apart like that, knowing that they wouldn't get the new people quite the way they had you."

"No. I hated it. I hated myself, I hated them for making me do it to them," Jim looked down at him, stroking his hair again. "I knew there wouldn't be anything left there for me, but what could I do?"

"What you believe in," Gil sighed. He shifted finally, and scooted sideways a little, laying his head
on Jim's thigh. "They still all thought you'd be satisfied from doing it, didn't they? They thought it was some kind of revenge. For Janice for... everything."

"Yeah, I guess some of them did. Mike was my partner. My best friend. I saved his life, he saved mine. We lived in each other's places and he did that. And yeah, they thought that was the reason. But it wasn't. If it had been about revenge then I would have done something else entirely. But..." Jim thought about it. How they had looked at him. "Something that didn't cost me everything, but I guess I never really had it, you know?"

"It doesn't seem that way when it goes away so easily." He could guess what Gil was thinking about -- his wife that had just left, the son he never saw. And Jim thought about Ellie when she was little, before she decided that she hated him.

"Not really a happy story, huh? Justice was done but personal stuff sucked," Jim replied soothing himself by stroking again. "You know what really pisses me off? I wasn't the one who killed Mike. I felt like I was cheated of something then."

"You were." Of murder? Maybe that was the edgy part of Gil talking, but then he went on, "You never confronted him, huh?"

"He knew I knew. But I never got to talk things out Jersey style," Jim replied. "With my fists. Because that would have fucked up the IA investigation and... all that."

"It would've made you feel better. Except for guilt about fighting with him just before he died." Gil shrugged a little and closed his eyes. "Lose-lose situation."

"Oh, I wouldn't have felt guilty," Jim said pretty sure he was telling the truth about that. "I really wouldn't. I'm different like that."

"Not that different. You're a soft touch beneath the hard-ass game. I like that. Both." Gil had his head on Jim's leg after all. "Most people don't see the mask games you play."

"I have a mask?" Jim asked out of habit as much as anything else. Of course he did. He knew he did. It was practically a job requirement.

He was still snarky and prone to deadpan without it, but there was him and then there was that extra layer that had to be there for protection's sake. Self preservation and all of that bullshit. "Yes." Yes, like Gil didn't have a mask or more layers than Jim had ever guessed, or problems balancing his self-imposed internal separations.

"I always fancied myself as the Lone Ranger," Jim mused absently. A slightly dirtier version though, with all the sharp edges of idealism worn off.

"Hi ho silver?" Gil chuckled quietly. "I used to love cowboy shows. Roy Rogers, the Lone Ranger..."

Yeah, Jim had no idea where the conversation was going. Where Gil's end of it was going because he seemed sleepy and drifting.

"Roy Rogers, yeah... I remember that. Wasn't there some sort of club or something?" It was a long time ago but it had been going strong when he'd been a kid.

"Official member." Gil made a vague gesture to himself with the hand that wasn't on Jim's knee. "My mother said it was the most normal thing I ever did."
Jim chuckled. "You? A member? I'm trying to imagine that." A kid Grissom, running around with a
cowboy hat. "I have this urge to see you in a cowboy hat now."

All this train of thought was nowhere near the dangerous thinking and patterns Gil was trying to
avoid. It was probably the wrong thing to do -- maybe he should be getting in touch with his feelings
or something but this seemed to be good. They were comfortable and partially at ease.

Jim had to admit that he needed that ease, needed just to relax for a few minutes. A few hours. And
talking with Gil was better than watching him obsess over Bible verses and serial killers. Seeing Gil
smile, stretched out almost comfortably on the bed. "We'd have to borrow it from Nicky."

"He owes me a favor, from last poker night," Jim replied. "You know Sanders is surprisingly good at
poker? I think it's because you can't tell which of his many quirks is a tell. Warrick was pissed."

"Why haven't I ever played poker with the lab techs?" Gil cracked open an eye. "You're speaking to
Warrick again?"

"Yeah. He screwed up, but it was my responsibility to stop that sort of thing," Jim replied. Holly
Gribbs was always going to be there in his mind as a rebuke. He'd fucked up. He'd pushed too hard
where he should have given slack, and been slack where he should have been tight. In short, he'd
played the department like they'd been cops. And that had worked for a while but CSI were different
to cops, way different. "Besides, he got his weakness screwed over by the judge. I figure there's no
point trying to blame him for anything."

"He had the courage to not do what Judge Cohen wanted. And he's getting help." Gil kept that one
eye on Jim, still talking. "It's not your fault. Any of us could have worked that scene."

"That's the worrying thing," Jim admitted. He remembered thinking about who he should assign. He
thought the competition would push them on. Cops worked well in competition but CSI's were
different. Rushing cut corners and... Holly was dead. "But we could all die a hundred ways every
day. Sometimes it's the people dead of stupid accidents that get me the most. Because it's usually a
really really stupid reason. Batteries in a smoke detector, a simple trip that breaks a neck, taking the
wrong pill because you couldn't be bothered to turn on the light to see what you're swallowing..."

"Because they never saw it coming." Gil shifted, and his eyes skated past Jim to look at the ceiling.
"Take us for example. The ceiling could collapse any second now, and we'd probably die when the
furniture on the floor above us hit."

"I just love your optimism, Gil," Jim grinned a little and stole a sweet pastry thing from one of the
many plate. He took a bite and offered it down to Gil, waving it in front of his nose. "Well if I have
to go, at least I'm not on my own."

"Misery loves company?" Gil moved his free hand to take it from Jim. It was probably too sweet or
too buttery or too something for Gil's stomach, but if Jim was already being a bad caretaker, hey.
What was a little extra badness between friends?

"More a case wanting to be with you, I guess." Jim wondered how it was that love got less
melodramatic and more sincere as he got older. Fuck. Angst tended to happen when people were
younger and hadn't experienced enough to take risks. He knew how to take risks. Even the difficult
ones involving emotions.

"You're not planning some sort of suicide love-pact with the ceiling on me, are you?" Gil sat up a
little, and that was all right. Jim's leg was starting to ache, and Gil's back cracked when he sat up,
before he scooted back to sit up against the headboard right beside Jim. "Because if you are, I think I
deserve a warning."

"I swear I'll tell you should I decide it's not worth going on," Jim replied. "Besides, looking for death isn't something I much want to do. I'm thinking there's a few things left for us to do. As long as they don't all involve bugs."

Although bugs weren't that bad. He could tolerate them for the look Grissom got when they came up. He tried not to show it, but he couldn't help smiling when Gil got that look.

That look, right there, that was in Gil's eyes just then. A gleam, and then a grin, like Gil knew his hobby was strange and relished it. "You're just lucky that Nicky's been taking care of them. I'd bet money that my tarantulas miss me."

"I bet they're pining for you," Jim said. "I thought you told me you didn't have any venomous ones -- and then I see people running in fear from your office. You're letting people think you've got the nasties aren't you?"

If he was thinking about tarantulas he wasn't thinking about Lecter or Millander. That was his job. Making sure there was no way they could get to him, harm him. There was a war about to be declared and out of all of them, he knew what it was to be in a war zone. And he knew how to survive.

"No harm, no foul. They're perfectly harmless, but plenty of people are afraid of harmless insects and arachnids." Gil shifted, leaning into Jim, shoulder to shoulder. "What time is it?"

"About ten," Jim replied without bothering to look at his watch. "You want to sleep and maybe go in tonight?"

"Would they let me?" Gil tilted his head. There was sunlight creeping in through the curtains, but Jim had pulled them pretty tightly hours ago.

"Right now? Yeah. Not to go out on cases but to be there and brainstorm. Atwater is going to be having kittens and all sorts of other furry creatures with the news the shit has hit the fan."

Or been baked into a dessert.

"Huh. Then I guess I'll try to go in tonight. The lab's a safe enough place to be..." Or wasn't, but Gil probably meant that it was safe because he was familiar with it rather than any real logistical safeness involved. "I guess I should organize some of this."

"Not now. Gil." Jim said calmly and distracted him with more stroking. "We've just spent a nice relaxing period of time talking about nothing much in particular and I'm glad because you won't have those thoughts chasing around. And neither will I. That way, we might get some sleep tonight."

"Is this based on the concept that if I sleep well, you sleep well because I'm not kicking in my sleep?" Gil turned his head a little, leaning closer and closer, like he wanted to try for something.

"Pretty much," Jim drawled. He could just lean forward, he could just take advantage but he'd made a big deal about it being Grissom's choice so he had to be cool and calm.... wonder how he drifted that little bit closer.

It was soft to start, Gil leaning in to press mouth against mouth before he turned towards Jim better, an arm sliding over his shoulder. That was definitely Gil's choice, and if Jim didn't start reacting to
that choice soon, Griss was going to get weirded out.

Fortunately, he wasn't going to angst the hell out of it. If Griss thought he was up to it, then he was and if he freaked midway, he wasn't going to get rejected. So he leaned forward into the kiss and... Wow, it was so much better when Gil wasn't actually half stunned with shock.

Gil knew how to move, knew how to lean into Jim so easily, his fingers sliding down along Jim's spine while he traced his tongue along Jim's lower lip for a second. Yeah, fuck, that was nice.

He could lose himself in that pretty easily, especially when there was that assurance there of knowing what they wanted and how to get it. Gil's lips were sweet from the pastry, and he gave himself enough room to suck at that bottom lip in response before moving in again, for a deeper, longer contact.

Gil was sort-of in control, and Jim was the one stuck between the headboard and Grissom, so he wasn't doing anything particularly wrong. Maybe just a little off track. Gil was the one kissing him, after all, and Gil was the one who groaned quietly when Jim sucked on his bottom lip, shifting to try to kiss Jim harder, firmer, sliding his tongue into Jim's mouth.

Jim really wished he hadn't thought that Sidle would've pissed herself to be him just then. Mood killer, but not enough to stop him indulging in some really good slow sensuous kissing. They weren't old, they were in their prime. Both of them. Matured, sensuous, confident. Fuck, it was going to be hard to stop and he was damn sure Gil couldn't go all the way. Well, not unless they took detours.

Maybe he could steer Gil for a detour, except that Gil was leaning back just a little, more with his torso so he didn't have to stop kissing Jim, one hand sliding between them, pulling at Jim's neck tie. Well, hell that was just fine and he could put his hands on him, lightly. No resistance but he had to touch him, feel him there. Fuck, that was hot. Not to get his hopes up though, because it would stop before they got started. He felt the tie slip from around his neck, smooth and slick, and then Gil started to unbutton Jim's shirt one handed. That was a pretty deft motion, and Gil shifted to kneel over Jim. "Fuck..."

"Easy Gil... easy," Jim murmured in a moment free of lips. "I'm here, not going anywhere." Not in a million years. Nothing would get him moving from that spot. Fuck. He kissed what he could reach again, his neck, his face and lips again.

"Good," Gil murmured, kissing Jim again for a moment before he started to pull at the last buttons of his shirt. "Slow is fine."

When he was thinking about the night ahead, this wasn't what he thought about at all. He seemed to remember last time he might have been the more dominant of them both, difficult with the big memory gaps. But, this was... this was good. Being undressed, holding back. He had patience, sometimes. When it was worth it, and this was worth it. And it had been a long time.

"Hey, I'm an old guy. Fast is out of the question."

"Not always." Gil pushed his shirt open, palms sliding smoothly over Jim's chest, up over chest hair until his fingertips rested on Jim's collarbone. Maybe it wouldn't stop before they got started.

Jim raised his eyebrow and smiled. "Well, let's see fast then," he challenged. Maybe Grissom really wanted it. Maybe he was distracting himself. He was certainly succeeding in distracting him.
And so what if Jim broke some other cardinal rule of watching out for people? Wouldn't be the first
time. Wouldn't be the last, and Gil, god knew why, trusted him as a friend. That was all that Jim
needed to know, what with Gil kneeling over him, pushing his shirt off of his shoulders. "If someone
knocks on the door, pretend we're dead."

"You keep moving this fast and that'll be true," Jim quipped back but he was unable to stop smiling.
It felt good, being undressed and Gil looking at him like that. And if Gil was using him, then he was
fine with that too. It wasn't going to give him major angst or pain. He would just stick to going where
Gil was taking him and enjoy the ride. And sober as well.

It had been a while since the last time he'd had sex, it was even longer if he counted back to the last
time he was sober. "I'm just trying to get your shirt off," Gil groaned, tilting his head down to kiss
Jim's neck.

"Really? Let's see if I can help you there," Jim said, pulling and tugging at the material until it came
off. Being on the streets again was starting to put a little more definition back into his body. It could
be worse. He tentatively fingered Gil's buttons as he tilted his neck towards the kisses.

Okay, so Gil wasn't trying to stop him from taking his shirt off. That was a good start, and he'd
definitely seen enough of Gil's physical state to be comfortable with the idea of shirtless Grissom
even if it hadn't previously been in a sexual way. "Sure."

"Mmm." He smiled at the revealed skin, and leaned in to kiss it. It was all too easy to get into it, and
just as easy to be irked that there were lines and strange ridges over his skin, things that Jim knew
formed into a disturbing picture. He was going to have to not-think about it, because otherwise his
half-erection was going to fail on him, and that would've been sad. He didn't have enough of them in
company that he particularly wanted to waste one. He could pretend that the difference in touch were
just minor things. He had scars too. Some with stories that he didn't particularly want to go into, if
only because they were embarrassing or they involved him going right up to the line and sneaking
over it when no one was looking. He could touch Gil's scars and not judge appearance as long as he
didn't think and get angry.

That was pretty much asking for a miracle, but Gil leaned into him again, moving almost anxiously
before he leaned back. "Jim..."

"Hmm?" Jim looked up directly into his eyes. "You want me to do something?"

Move, touch, kiss. It was a bit strange being the more passive one, but that didn't mean that he didn't
like it.

Gil sat back on his knees, probably with his heels up against his ass, the insides of his thighs resting
faintly against Jim's legs. "Are you... all right with this? I'm not really thinking clearly, but..."

"Gil, I'm not saying no, am I?" Jim said gently. He could stop Gill if he had to. "I told you, do what
you are comfortable with and I'm there all the way. You want to stop, we stop. You want to go
forward I'm up for it."

"Just that easy?" Like he didn't believe it, even though he was shrugging off his shirt as he asked that
question. Now Jim could see Millander's handiwork in its uncovered glory, except for a few deeper
parts of the damage that Gil still kept bandaged. There was a fresh nick on his chest, too, a straight
line that caught Jim's eyes in with all of the other distracting lines.

He reached and touched it. "He did this. He did this last night?" He made it a question but he knew.
The rest he knew about, it was in his head and a damn sight more pleasant to him than the memory
of Gil carved and half butchered on that bed. Everything was relative in a way, and compared to some of the things he had seen, Gil was the epitome of beauty -- in a masculine wrong side of middle-aged way. He leaned forward and kissed the line slightly, as if that would help.

"I think I breathed when he wasn't expecting me to." Gil's fingers drifted up over Jim's shoulders, and he sighed a little when Jim kissed there. "You feel good."

"Good." Jim murmured. Hey, he might not work like Lecter or Millander but he had better ways of claiming territory. Do it right and no one lost out and Gil would be distracted. He could kiss every part of him if that would make some of their grip shake loose. He wanted to say, Yeah, Gil, this is mine, not theirs. There was the taste of faint antiseptic on the skin, but he could taste Gil underneath it all and it was easy to roam with his mouth and fingers.

It was easy to draw a groan out of him, and Gil's fingers lost a little of their insistent urge to do whatever it was that they'd been doing before Jim had started to reciprocate. Gil leaned back for a moment, before he leaned forwards again, towards Jim. "I think we should move... now, or I'll never be able to get your pants off."

"Well, I take it as a plus that you want my pants off," Jim murmured helping him to get his pants off. What the hell, they needed to get ready for bed anyway. He had to remember not to be too pushy about it. Hard to do, because as he'd been told before, Jim Brass was the definition of pushy.

Gil scooted back, and his fingers drifted to Jim's belt. There was something far from sparing and unsexual about unbuckling Jim's belt, because Gil's hands lingered even after the metal clinked a little, and then he slowly popped the top button.

"You know there is a time where you don't have to be so methodical about uncovering ... evidence," Jim quipped, feeling even more of a reaction at the tentative brushes and touches.

"And this is evidence of what, Jim?" Gil tilted his head to peer at Jim for a minute before he slid his fingers down to pull the zipper down. Maybe Jim wasn't imagining it that he could feel every tooth as it slid free.

"Evidence that I don't have a problem with this at all," Jim replied smirking just a little. Gil was a tease, he'd have to remember that.

"But is it firm evidence?" Gil paused for a moment, and pressed his fingers over the outline of Jim's half-hard dick where he'd slid it down his left pantleg. "Huh, seems to be."

Jim nearly choked on a laughing groan. "Gil... I can't believe. No, scratch that I can believe you just said that."

And he loved it, because that was the Gil Grissom he knew, the real thing and he was back and making bad puns even as they edged around sex.

"Yeah?" Gil shifted a little, balancing on his knees and one hand, the other hand sliding just inside of Jim's pants, feeling him over the fabric of his boxers. "Just consider yourself lucky I haven't put on gloves?"

Jim mock winced. "And if I said I liked you in latex?" he drawled back even as he could feel the tightening ache of his cock responding to that touch and movement.

"I'd have to think about whether I wanted to actually leave the hotel room to get some from a drug
store. They wouldn't be as sterile as what we get at work, but..." Gil winked, and leaned on his knees for a moment before he started to pull at the waistband of Jim's pants to get them off.

"You know? I think I'll pass on that just this once..." Jim replied arching up enough to his pants moved down. He was more than ready to progress further even if he couldn't believe what was happening. "You need more help there?"

"I think I have it, but if you want to give me a hand..." Gil shifted to the side of him, and pulled his pants down to his thighs. Jim still had his boxers on but he was pretty sure they wasn't going to stay that way much longer.

Well that was just fine and good and as far as he was concerned, everything could come off. Immediately. God, it felt good. Someone else's hand there, touching and squeezing gently. He'd forgotten what that was like.

"I could give you two," he replied, tugging his clothes down

"Hands?" Gil knocked Jim's pants to the floor as soon as he had them off, and his own shirt joined the clothes on the floor instead of it lying on the bed.

"Oh yeah. You need help yourself?" Normally he would have just started undressing his partner and assumed it was all okay, but this was a different situation. There could still be a halt called. God he hoped it wouldn't be.

"Well, I still have two free hands, but I wouldn't say no to help." He was still kneeling, so that was going to take some creative moving.

Jim decided he could be creative up to a point. After all, he could make it a teasing gentle attempt at removing clothing. He reached and cupped a large hand over Gil's groin, gentle and not to pushy. At least not to start with.

Gil groaned, and leaned into Jim's hand, meeting the pressure. "Tease."

"How can you say that after how long you've spent unwrapping my package huh?" He took that as encouragement and stroked him through the material as there other hand fumbled with his pants.

"It's a nice package," Gil murmured, closing his eyes a little while Jim managed that. He got them unbuttoned and started to slide them down, except that he was going to have to move his hand. Well, it was for the greater good. If all they managed was some mutual fondling, that was a mutual fondling up on where his love life had been for some time. He rubbed a little as he moved his hand, and kissed Gil when he had his eyes closed. Then he helped pull the pants down, even if it meant getting Gil to move just a little. There was that funny moment where Gil almost fell over in a fit of lost balance before he finally got his pants off, boxers gone with them, too. It sounded good to hear Gil laugh, before he leaned into Jim, fingers sliding to his hips. "Hi."

"Hi. You know, we appear to be naked?" Jim observed smiling at him. "Strange, huh? Two grown men, inexplicably naked... What do you think we should do?"

Gil shifted again, one hand sliding down to wrap loosely around Jim's dick. "I think I have a handle on a general direction we could take."

"Oh really?" Jim followed suit clasping him gently in return. "Am I following you close enough?"
"I think you have the hang of it." And then Jim had Gil shifting to lie close beside him, against him, so it was easier to kiss and touch at the same time, Gil's fingers stroking him only idly, like the contact was more important than the fondling.

He turned, leaning up on one elbow, his fingers drifting over Gil's cock softly. Before, in a drunken haze they had grappled with passion, and let it leave its marks over them both. This was more intimate, and intense. Catching a butterfly...

Gil would laugh if he knew he got poetical during sex.

"I have the hang of you." And how to stroke him just firm enough to tease and excite, and to kissed long enough to forget how to breathe. He could be in his twenties and learning how to do it right for the first time.

"Good." Gil's fingers slid along the underside of Jim's dick, pausing to slide his thumb over the flared head. "Yeah, just like that..."

Of course, age had perks, like a long time of knowing how best to touch himself, and trial and error of getting things right. And wrong, but he tended to forget about them and remember the successes. He knew the sensitive spots, the circular motion that would make sensation burn. Just as Gil made his own erection swell.

"Like this, too..." he murmured. Yeah, this was safe and good. Jerking each other off -- no harm in it.

No harm, and Gil seemed okay, better than okay, turning and twisting closer to Jim. He had deft fingers, and he didn't stop kissing Jim, barely giving Jim the space to get out words. "Mmh, good. Yeah..."

Somehow they had gotten close enough that they could nearly rub against each other, and Jim found himself tangling legs and trying to use his other arm to pull Gil closer. "Like that..." he murmured flexing his hips unconsciously.

He managed to get his leg over Gil's, and Gil slid a leg between his own legs, and they were that much closer, made it that much easier for their fingers to tangle, until Gil wrapped his fingers around both of them at once, giving a stroke.

"Uhhn..." His voice nearly disappeared. "Fuck, Gil. Do that again..." It had squeezed them flesh to flesh and rubbed them against the other. He kissed Gil harder, his noble thoughts of just riding this out eroding under the sensations.

He wasn't just going to ride it out. It felt too damn good, and Gil was actively liking it, actively making it better for them both, stroking them in a way that Jim knew wasn't his first time trying that trick. But the feeling of the other man's dick, a little shorter and a little wider than his own, rubbing up against his, underside to underside, made for the best masturbation he'd had in years. It was a different sensation, augmented by their tangling movement of bodies that kept on going without conscious thought. He was kissing Gil, and rocking against him, into that hand, and Gil was doing the same, bracing himself with his own grip.

Gil groaned against his mouth, almost made a pleading noise, hips rocking faster against Jim's, one hand clutching tight against Jim's back, the other pressing and stroking as fast as he could without losing any contact.

Jim found himself reaching to engulf his hand around Gil's and to join in the movement. Together they managed more of a complete pumping action and for a moment Jim was totally lost to the
passion of it. His kisses were fervent and passionate, no heed to caution, his body pushing and rubbing against him feeling the edge of climax creeping up on him.

He liked that, and he knew he'd later reflect on how he still didn't feel he had to treat Gil like he was fragile, even after what happened, so it didn't even twinge in his mind when those last few thrusts turned rough and desperate. Because he could hear Gil groan, panting, muscles tensing before his fingers and hand faltered. "Jim, fuck, just..." Just something, but Gil was already coming.

It was hot and warm and slick and he was sliding, not just rubbing flesh to flesh, and it was surprising enough to bring him off as well, hard and fast in his thrusting movement. He had to stop himself from reaching round to grab Gil's ass, but he did hold him close to him, breathing heavily as he wound down his movements. "Fuck..."

He could feel Gil's breath against his neck, and he could feel Gil curling into him, catching his breath, too, moving closer even though they were both sticky. Gil's fingers, slick from being between them, slid up to grasp Jim's hip. "Yeah..."

"You know, I'll start suggesting we go to bed earlier if this is the result," Jim murmured, kissing him again. Fuck the mess between them, he'd get up in a minute and clean them both up.

"I could go for that." Gil dragged his hand up, seemingly content just to hold into Jim and kiss him a little. "In case you were wondering, that was consent."

"I'll make a note. When I can move," Jim replied smiling ridiculously. Life had some pretty good moments all in all. He'd just had sex like a teenager full of eager frantic unexpected movement balanced with the touch of experience. "It was unexpected."

"It felt good," Gil said, more like he was noticing it again than that he was pointing it out to Jim for any real purpose. "This is much better sober."

"Well, remembering it is a good start," Jim managed. He'd have to move in a little while. They would get cold and... He was supposed to be looking after Gil.

He wasn't supposed to let Gil get cold. "This is a good start." A kiss was placed so very carefully against the side of his mouth. "Thanks."

"Well, tough job, you know?" Jim joked back. He moved a little. "You just stay there, I'm going to clean us up some more, and then we can get that sleep. Don't want you getting cold."

"I think there are plates still on the bed," Gil murmured, a rumble of noise that sounded like he'd be asleep when Jim came back. Yeah, that was good. He'd put the Bible and the notebook and everything else off of the bed, too. It was starting to get up towards eleven or noon by then, anyway, and those crazies could strike at any time. They needed to keep on top of their sleep.

He moved slowly, cleaning efficiently and even coming back and gently wiping Gil off as the other man dozed on the bed. He did it as quick as he could so he could return and get Gil into the bed with him. It involved a bit of steering of the semiconscious man to get him under the covers and he slipped in next to him with a relieved sigh. His gun was close, and so was Gil. There had been sex after a fashion, and expenses paid room service. Things had turned out okay.

It didn't make up for knowing that Lecter was in the city with them, but if Gil could sleep the apparent sleep of the innocent after his encounter, Jim figured he could give it a shot, too.
It was strange that he'd guessed Grissom was back in the office before he'd even known for sure that he was back. There had just been a feeling in the office; a familiar tension that he hadn't realized could go missing until a few days ago.

People were walking on eggshells, but it was something. Griss wasn't hiding out at Chez Brass anymore, but was in his own office when Nick came towards it.

It was good to have him there. Technically, he knew Grissom wasn't actually working, but he knew he'd want to know the results of his analysis. The Feds were running around playing the publicity game because word had leaked out somehow that Lecter was in town although that was the whole of the story so far. The media were going to shit themselves when it all came out, but they were keeping it under wraps.

Warrick was out with Sara, Catherine had ended up taking a double solo because he was needed in the lab. They'd be back soon enough and he'd promised to get some take-out in for all of them. The Sheriff had eyes and ears only for this case and he wasn't going to cut the investigation down now it had just fired up again.

It was just a matter of knocking on the door and waiting for Gil to get out of the chair and answer it or tell him that he could come in.

"Yes?"

"Hey, Griss." Nick stepped inside looking at him. There were subtle differences to him, he could see that. He'd lost weight, and held himself differently. He felt a pang of worry that he might be different somehow, not the Grissom he knew.

"I thought you might want an update."

"I appreciate that." Gil had a coffee mug in hand, and papers strewn out over the desk. He gestured for Nick to close the door behind him, and Nick still couldn't shake that feeling that Gil was different than how he'd been at the hospital. "Why don't you sit down and catch me up on it?"

"You sure? Jim said not to push things if you were busy," Nick said, coming in and sitting anyway even as he put his files on the desk. He should have remembered to get himself coffee before he came in.

"Was Jim also growling when he gave that suggestion?" Gil let Nick be confused for a moment, and then he smiled. "He's been being my watchdog. I'm fine -- you're not pushing it, Nick. I genuinely need to know what's going on."

"Cool." Nick smiled a little. "I've done most of the processing -- went over Jim's house. Looks like he was wearing gloves when he came in the back window. Small marks consistent with someone climbing through but no trace and he used a glass cutter so there was no glass shatter. Looks like then, from some slight trace on the carpet that he went to the kitchen area and we've confirmed all the utensils were from Jim's kitchen. The food, if you can call it that he brought with him. The 'juice' was urine. Specifically female urine. FBI agent female urine."

"Clarice Starling," Gil filled in for Nick, and it made Nick want to grin a little. "Was there a message in that bottle of urine?"

"Only that she's pregnant," Nick dropped the bombshell -- Jack Crawford had nearly had an apoplexy when he'd looked over Greg's shoulder and seen the results come up. "I'm guessing that's some sort of message in itself. But there was a message in the bottom of the cereal bowl. It said..."
"Doth not he see my ways, and count all my steps?", Gil quoted at him, the same tone he used when he quoted Shakespeare. "Book of Job. So he'd already put the pieces together before I quoted it to him. Nice to know. The message that she's pregnant is... pretty clear."

"Yeah. I'm thinking he's saying he'll be watching... that he's waiting for Millander to make the next move." Nick cleared his throat. "Sara was better at the Lecter thing than I was. I was working on Millander."

"Sara was going at it from the wrong angle and wondering why she missed things." That was... not so much something that Nick expected to come out of Gil's mouth, but there it was. "Tell me what you managed with Millander?"

No pressure.

"Well, looks like she witnessed her father's murder as Pauline and her testimony was discounted in favor of physical evidence which supported suicide," Nick said after clearing his throat. "Look like he got an obsession with justice and testing that justice will be done properly. I think that's what he was doing before. Seeing if we would fall into the same trap, and I'm guessing that we were the first to pick up that it wasn't suicide. Specifically you were. His mother said after his father died, he tried to be more mannish. More aggressive. I'm thinking it was a power thing, you know? Being powerless and discounted as a female, and having the option to change that and be something else."

"What his mother probably didn't tell you was that he'd had the gender issues since he was a child. I'm sure she'd like to think there was a reason other than... Paul being Paul, naturally." Paul. Like he hadn't almost killed Grissom and raped him.

Like he was any other suspect.

He was sure he couldn't have done that. Not ever. "Yeah. Well, the warehouse thing? What his father used to do. The fingerprints belonged to Paul Millander senior -- another message that could lead to him. I'm thinking that if you caught him before he got any further, you won. And so did he. And then the rules changed. I think -- though it's not the popular FBI theory, Millander did everything he could to get Lecter here. He had to do something pretty spectacular to do that, because from what I understand, Vegas really isn't his sort of place, so he found the connection and sent a message through a crime scene. And then Lecter comes back and does the same. He wanted us to identify he was there. He deliberately left a fingerprint... just one, on the spoon. And the bacon... is coming back human. We're not sure who though. Greg is running it through Codis."

It had been a really busy night.

"I thought it was." Gil grimaced. "But the smell ends up about the same. It could've come from a funeral home, or it could be a cabdriver that pissed him off. It's hard to guess. I'd bet that it's back meat."

"Back meat?" Nick asked. How did Gil know this sort of stuff? He'd never really understood that. He hated to think that someone had gone to the trouble to kill someone to send messages at a crime scene.

"Lecter used to select pieces of his victims that were most... translatable to cooking. Liver, brain, kidneys, back meat," Gil rattled off, and took a sip of his coffee.

"Back bacon." Nick said and grimaced a little. "You see anything else in the scene that I missed? We
ran everything but he knew what he was doing when it came to not leaving trace.

"I haven't had the photographs to look over," Gil murmured, sitting back in his chair. "And at the
time, I... wasn't paying enough attention. He made it a quick trip, that's all I'm sure of, and he took
everything he'd brought with him back out of the house again, but I gave him time to do that."

"Hell, I'm not sure I would've been able to move." He didn't say anything about the fact he'd
processed Jim's bed as the scene and Grissom had been in it. He was trying to get his head around
that. He hadn't thought either Griss or Jim was gay, and maybe he was making an assumption. "He's
announcing he's here and ready to play, I guess. So we're in the game zone as Greg calls it."

"Except you can't save your play, and you can't reboot it." Gil's mouth twitched a little. "And
unfortunately, we're the pieces. I want you to keep your eyes open, Nick. Anything could be a sign
or a clue, or a signal."

"Gotcha." He looked at his watch. "Cath and the others are going to be back in soon. I'd said I'd pick
up something for them. You want to get a bit of fresh air?"

It would be okay if they were together. It was leaving Grissom alone that was the problem, that's
what Jim had said.

"Sure. I'm getting used to only having supervised outings." Gil leaned forwards for a moment,
putting his hands on the desk before he stood up. "Was there anything else?"

"No. The scene was really clean, Griss. Even your clothes and the whole area. I went over it all.
That's all we got. No trails in or out, just the evidence on the breakfast tray and some evidence of
where he walked in the house." Nick felt like he was apologizing as if he should have found more.
He felt like he was letting Grissom down by not coming up with more of an answer.

"He's been living on the lam for years. He's conscientiously careful." Gil was still holding himself
strangely, but Nick could only guess that was from or left over from his injuries. Like his whole torso
hurt and it would've been easier to curl in on himself than stand up straight and tall.

"Yeah, I get that," Nick replied. "You sure you want to come? I was gonna walk down a couple of
blocks. We could drive."

"We can walk." And he said it like he was wondering just what Nick was implying. Okay, so trying
to be thoughtful for Griss was a no-go.

Fine, he could pretend normal. As long as he didn't think too hard about the scene he had worked
and the fact that sleep was pretty damn difficult for all of them who'd been in that upper room.
Catherine, Warrick and himself. They were finding it hard, but Greg was being there. That was
unexpected, but pretty cool, so there was something to distract him. Greg could distract a statue.
"C'mon, they told me what they wanted. We can choose when we get there."

"That sounds fine. How's the lab been?" Maybe acting like that was Gil's way of coping. That and
sleeping in Jim's bed. That wouldn't have been so weird, but Brass was only three months not-their
boss.

"Stretched," Nick replied truthfully as he stood and they both headed to the locker room so he could
get his jacket. "We're really pushing it without you. Griss."

"I'm sorry. I'm going to try to come back as soon as I can. Things are just... strange right now. I'm
only back to look at this case and see if I can be of any use right now." He paused to grab his jacket, and then opened the door for Nick.

"Didn't mean it like that, Griss," Nick said as they headed off. "Just that you were missed." He smiled a little hesitantly as they made their way out.

"I know I am. At least, that's what everyone keeps telling me. But you won't be able to miss me if I come back to work, right?" Gil smiled back a little, and it was funny for him to even notice that Nick was trying.

"Right," he grinned a little and nodded as they reached the front doors. "When do you think that'll be. Griss? I mean, you're half back now."

"Once everything calms down. When this is over." So he didn't expect it to take any time at all? Or hardly any. He shrugged into his coat, and fell into step with Nick. "I'll probably take a day off after that, but I'm looking forwards to getting all of this behind me again."

"I don't blame you," Nick replied as he slowed his walk just a little as they hit the street. "Pretty stressful." That had to be the biggest understatement ever. He wanted to offer something. Support maybe, he wasn't sure, but more than just words. He wasn't sure how to, though. It was easier with most people, almost anyone, than it was with Grissom, because he didn't ever act like normal people. He was a mystery, and the why of it was starting to make a lot more sense to Nick. There had to be a way to reach out normally to a guy who wasn't.

"Yeah. Has, uh. Jack been causing any problems in the lab?"

Nick smiled a little. "He doesn't like me much, or Warrick. Catherine and him have shouting matches pretty much every time he gets in. Sara gets along with him."

He didn't understand why, after all that had happened. He could understand how it wasn't clear what they had done.

"Sara does. He's trying to get her to join the FBI," Gil murmured, voice losing a little of its warmth. "They're a lot alike in a lot of ways."

"Well, I think it's stupid to be taken in when the evidence is right there," Nick said as they walked. It wasn't far to their local Chinese place. Sometimes they ordered in, but if he went there and smiled at the girl who served them, they got extra. Nice reward for a short walk across a couple of blocks.

"Evidence of what? Better pay scale, better equipment, more excitement?" Gil slid his hands into his coat pocket. "You're looking at different evidence than Sara's looking at when it comes to Jack."

"I guess so," Nick said as they walked down the street. He hadn't thought of that; it just seemed obvious that if they screwed over a friend then working for them was a way to get screwed over yourself. He heard the rev of an engine behind them on the street and was about to ignore it when he remembered he was meant to be looking at anything and everything.

He glanced over his shoulder.

Just a truck, nothing to worry about. It had headlights going, and everything seemed normal. "But it's heartening to know that you're looking at the same evidence that I've been looking at." He stopped on the corner, and glanced up at the crosswalk light.

"Seems pretty clear to me.," Nick admitted. They were clear to go and they both stepped out across the road. Only he could still hear that truck and the revs weren't slowing.
He turned and glanced again and the truck was there, too close, swerving to line up on Grissom a couple of steps ahead of him and he was going to be hit.

Nick didn't even think. He was bellowing Grissom's name at the top of his lungs and half jumping, half lunging forward to get him clear.

In slow motion, he saw himself push Gil clear even as the truck hit him in his jump midair and he bounced up onto the hood, against the windscreen before almost ricocheting off into the road. It was like he was dreaming because he was still awake but nothing was moving and there was no air in his lungs and he couldn't even tilt his head to look at the registration as it sped away.

Fuck he hurt.

"Nick! Jesus, Nick, hold on, Nicky..." Fingers against his pulse point, maybe the only clear sensation he could feel.

He couldn't help but think he should be unconscious instead of feeling a combination of numb fire up over his side and back. He'd forgotten how to breathe and things were getting gray around the edges until he inhaled deeply and a dam broke on pain making him nearly choke as it hit him all at once in a deluge of liquid fire.

"Just breathe, Nicky. Keep breathing, I'm getting you help." Help that would hopefully make the pain stop, because he'd gotten hit by a car, a truck, and it hadn't stopped. He was just lucky that he hadn't gotten flipped into its bed or worse. There'd been that one traffic accident with the motorcyclist whose head had been squished inside of his helmet.

Maybe... maybe... It hadn't stopped, it had been accelerating, it had been deliberate and Grissom was out in the road, out in the road with him inviting it back. It could be Lecter, it could be Millander, and Gil should be running and hiding, getting away.

He'd seen a face, he'd seen it swerve to line up on Gil he had to... had to...

"Griss..." He wasn't sure if there was sound there or just a moment of his lips. "Griss..."

Except Gil didn't seem to notice the danger, stayed with him. Nick could hear the sound of Gil on his cell phone, and then a vehicle pulling up beside them. The sound of sirens, and the flash of lights against the outside of Nick's eyelids.

He forced his eyes open to look and see, to try and check that it wasn't that face wasn't Millander. Yes it had been him. A moment of light and closeness when he bounced up and eyes looking at him, calm and focused. He moved his leg, feeling it, but moving. No stabbing pain. Moved his hand to try and catch at Grissom and wondered how they had gotten there so quickly.

He clutched at Grissom, trying to move, to sit up. There were no leaking feelings, no jutting bones. Things blurred a little as he reached for him, to see if he was okay. He was solid, he had muscle.

He'd been midair when he hit the car so he probably hadn't fractured his kneecaps. Maybe cracked ribs or his arm where he hit the hood and windscreen. They felt a little numb.

"Grissom..."

"Stay still. You could have spinal trauma, or..." Something. Gil said something, and Nick missed it because he could hear... Warrick?

"Jesus. Nick, stay still. Hey, man, we've got the ambulance coming for you, just from around the corner."
"M'okay..." Nick tried to speak with some success. "Millander. Was Millander. Steered and went for Griss..." There, that was most of his strength but someone had to know that they were all still standing somewhere a maniac could be turning around and heading back to get them.

Though he wasn't sure how long it had been since he was hit.

"I got down the license plate number," Gil told them both. "So just relax, Nicky. We'll get you out of here in a minute, and you're going to be all right."

Nick felt he'd done all he could and breathed out in a sigh. He shouldn't have asked Grissom to come with him. He shouldn't have put him in danger and fuck, it was starting to hurt and he was dizzy and he had to close his eyes.

Somewhere in that moment of time, the noises faded, everything faded, and he very slowly and gently passed out.

Catherine hated the fact they didn't know how bad Nick was yet. She hated the fact that Gil looked like he had personally driven him down, and that when he looked at her before they went out, she thought she had seen a hint of 'I told you so'.

It was one thing to know intellectually what might happen but much more shocking to experience. To know that Nick had saved Gil's life and could be losing his own.

Gil had remembered the registration but that had hardly been necessary when they had been called to the scene of a truck dump. Millander -- and she was sure the trace would confirm it was him -- must have driven a little way and then dumped it. He'd set a fire in the truckbed so it hadn't been long before it had been called in and she had taken Sara out there to work the scene. They had been uncharacteristically quiet out there on scene, absorbed in their thoughts and she looked at the bagged evidence they were bringing back in. "You got anything that needs to go in to Greg?"

"DNA?" Sara shrugged. "Nothing obvious. No food waste, no burnt skin, no hairs that I could salvage..." She seemed tired, resigned to what had happened. Like she'd seen it coming, or Gil had told her it was coming and she hadn't believed it.

"I've got some blood from the hood." Probably Nick's, but she didn't want to say that. "And a couple of hairs from the driver seat. You got the paper that was on the passenger side?"

Catherine sounded tired even to herself and a lot of it was from worrying so much.

She didn't know how to stop worrying. If she wasn't worrying about Gil, well, now she had Nick to add to the list of people to worry about. Nick didn't have a Jim Brass hanging over him.

"Yeah. It's bagged, and I want to look at the writing more carefully, but couldn't just then."

"Writing or numbers? There were numbers at Jim's place..." How the hell had Brass and Gil managed to deal with the worry of all of them being out all the time exposed to danger? It was not dissimilar to worrying about Lindsay. "Could be something to do with that reference."

"Numbers," Sara murmured, sitting back in Catherine's passenger seat, flipping the evidence bag around in her hands. "30:22."

"Sounds like we'll be looking that up in the Bible when we get to the lab. Unless you have the book
"of Job memorized?" She raised an eyebrow at Sara. If she'd been working with Gil, she would have been surprised if he hadn't quoted it off immediately.

"Unfortunately, I don't. Not yet, anyway." She managed a smile at Catherine. "But I can call Gil at the lab and see what he says it is."

"Yeah. Yeah that's an idea. I want to see if there's any news about Nick, too," Catherine replied. "The rest of the vehicle looked pretty standard. Impact marks, damage consistent. We can put it through a fine tooth comb when we have it back at CSI." She exhaled, shaking her head. Fuck. What was going to be next? Gil had said something about fire. Maybe they would try fire at the lab. They needed to give the place a going over. Look for any incendiary devices, look for anyone suspicious. It made sense to a point.

Sara pulled out her cell phone while Catherine pondered it, and she could hear Sara's side of the conversation.

"Griss? It's Sara. We've got a set of numbers from the scene here. '30:22'. Does that mean anything to you?"

Catherine would bet it did. She watched Sara a moment as she listened, wondering if Nick had been right about her looking to jump ship to the FBI. They all knew she had recommended against Warrick and that meant it was difficult to warm to her but...

She was damn good at the job. Different style, different angle, but good. She picked up what most people would miss, and in their world that was the edge they needed.

Just then, they needed any edge at all. There had to be some reason why Grissom had brought her in to run the IA, and Catherine suspected that he'd picked up on that edge, that he knew she was good. "Okay. So it is from the book of Job..."

"No surprises there then," Catherine said as they reached where they had parked. "What's the quote?"

"Thou liftest me up to the wind; thou causest me to ride upon it, and dissolves my substance. 'Or, as it translates to crazy land, I'll run you down with a car," Sara frowned.

"Great," Catherine said with heavy sarcasm. "Ask him if there's any news from the hospital?" If she was on the phone, she'd ask Gil how he was doing and try and stop him thinking it was his fault. He would, she knew that, and it wasn't. She was proud of Nick and she hoped to God Grissom acknowledged that, too. Nick lit up at Grissom's praise.

"Is there anything you know about Nick... ?" Another pause. Maybe Gil would visit Nick in the hospital and just firm up the fact that he was proud of Nick. Just say something, make sure he was all right.

But then, could he go to the hospital and be safe if there were two serial killers gunning for him? He'd been lucky. Nick had been lucky to be midair when he was hit -- it meant he hadn't pitched headfirst through the windscreen like a lot of hit and runs did. She waited anxiously as he undid the central locking on her car and opened the door. She willed Sara not to keep her waiting for good news.

"Okay? That's great to hear. Thanks, yeah. I'll pass it on." Good news, great to hear. Good, good. Sara closed her phone, and managed a smile at Catherine. "The doctors are going to keep him
"Only overnight? He's not too bad?" He'd been hit by a truck and Catherine had scraped up enough DB's after hit and runs to know it was usually messy, not 'okay'. Thank god. She felt a huge unknotting inside her stomach as if they had had a close shave.

"Bruised ribs on one side. One's fractured, and there's a small fracture on his arm. He doesn't seem concussed, but they want him under observation anyway," Sara told her while she got in.

"Jesus, he was lucky," Catherine said almost without thinking. "The truck looks like it's been totaled." The hood was completely buckled and distorted where Nick had bounced on it, the windscreen smashed and the frame of it twisted. Nick had a fair amount of mass to him and there had been a good speed to the vehicle when they'd collided.

"Before or after Millander set fire to it?" Sara arched an eyebrow, and gave Catherine a look.

"Before. Nicky made some hard impact points," Catherine replied. The both of them were staying professional and it was the last thing she wanted to do. But she had to or it would fall apart. "We've got to look into some protection for the lab. For Grissom."

"What kind of protection would be enough, Catherine?" Just the question that Catherine wished Sara hadn't asked, because she didn't have a ready answer to it.

"I don't know, but considering we don't have any, something has got to be better than nothing," Catherine answered as they got in her car. "This is only the first day Lecter's been in town. I've got a feeling they aren't going to be patient."

"Maybe not by our standards. Griss... told me that time isn't an element that they consider." And by the way that Sara didn't immediately elaborate on it; Catherine could guess that she hadn't quite finished gasping whatever it was that Gil meant by that.

"Right. Well let's hope they're on a go-slow rather than fast-forward," Catherine replied. "The Sheriff is going to be all over this when we get back in. You mind taking the stuff down to Greg while I go kiss ass?"

"Oh, by all means. I'm not as good at the ass-kissing as you are, anyway." Sara winked, and reached to start sorting and organizing all of their pieces of evidence. The vehicle was still going to get towed to the garage, but they could handle that when it arrived.

"Thanks. I think." Catherine said dryly. She started the engine and pulled out. She just hoped Gil was okay and this hadn't been too much of a shock. She knew for a fact that Brass was going to be beside himself, but she was surprised to find that she was willing to trust him to deal with Gil. That was a surprising conclusion but an interesting one. If there was something good to come out of all this, maybe it might be to force two stubborn men to get off their asses and do something about their lives. Preferably together.

It might even work.

It had started.

It didn't start with a thunderclap, no, but Gil might have appreciated it more if it had. It started with an engine revving, and he hadn't heard it, hadn't heard Nick shout his name, though he could guess that he had. He'd felt the impact of a body against his, knocking him mostly out of the way. He'd been clipped with the side-view mirror on his shoulder, but that didn't matter when Nick had almost
died.

Could have died.

He'd twisted in time to see him bounce on the road. And he had bounced before he'd splayed out unmoving and unseeing. He remember staring and not seeing Nick's chest moving just for a moment even as he instinctively looked at the truck speeding away and got the number.

The moment kept replaying over and over in his head. One moment normal conversation, the next.... Nick could have been killed with so many things he hadn't ever said to him. Like he was proud of him, that he did a good job and should follow his own way when he felt it was right.

None of that said but here he was back in the hospital, Jim coming to pick him up soon and take him home, or to the hotel. He wasn’t sure where they were going, but he’d asked to come here and now he was here... he didn't know what to do or say.

That really would've seemed a little less pathetic if Nick hadn't been asleep, but Gil hadn't ever been one for talking to the sleeping. The dead. It was too close to home, or too close to something, and he didn't do it. He sat there, watching Nick and knowing that he'd probably come around out of exhaustion soon enough.

He could see bruises coming up on the younger man's face and he couldn't believe that they were going to let him out the next day. He’d had cracked ribs. They were fucking painful to start with and it was harder than it seemed. It meant the injured person couldn't bend, move right, do up their shoes. Even so, he knew Nick had been lucky.

He could be dead.

Nick was shifting a little, restless. Sure enough, he tried to move something he shouldn't have and that brought him awake. "Ow..."

If it had been anyone else, including Catherine -- especially Catherine -- they would have woken with a stream of invective.

But not Nick, and that made Gil wonder if it was a matter of his influences. If it was a matter of how he was raised, or just personality. "Hi, Nick."

"Hey, Griss," Nick looked at him a little blearily. "They got you in here, too? You get hurt much?"

He obviously had no sense of how long he'd been there.

"No, I'm all right." Gil reached to pat Nick's hand, avoiding the IV. "Thanks to you."

"Thanks to me?" Nick looked a bit puzzled. "Oh yeah. Yeah, I should've noticed the first time I looked. Missed it." He looked surprised at the contact on his hand and smiled a bit. "Least you're okay, right? No harm done."

"Except to you," Gil countered rationally. "I didn't even hear it coming, Nick. You saved my life."

Nick actually looked embarrassed at the statement. "Well... I...." He cleared his throat a little and tried a half smile. "Do I get a raise?"

"I thought you just got a raise?" Gil tsked slightly, and kept smiling at Nick. "That was above and
beyond the call of duty, Nick."

"So that's a no?" Nick grinned again. "Guess I won't be doing it again then." He squeezed just a little with his hand to make sure Gil knew he was joking. Gil knew Nick would do it again and that was what worried him.

"Hopefully the opportunity won't present itself for you to get hit by a car again. You're too important to the team for that to happen to you. You're too important to all of us."

He was saying things he never thought he'd say, and from Nick's expression things he thought he never be hearing him say.

"Griss, anyone would have done it for you, you know that, right?" Nick said slowly. "I know you don't want us to, but I'm telling you I'm grateful I had the opportunity, you know?"

He knew, grasped it as a concept, and held it with the knowledge that he would've done it for Nick if he'd just been paying attention. "Nick. I really appreciate what you did. Just... I want you to concentrate on getting better and staying safe now. I was in the lab for a while looking over your notes, and you've really done a good job on this case."

It was painfully obvious how much that meant to the younger man. It was like watching someone win the lottery because he guessed Nick was a little too drugged up to control his expression. "Thanks. That's good. You don't think I missed anything? They weren't really interested in the Millander angle, so I was covering it myself and it's easier with more eyes looking at it."

"I don't think you missed anything, Nick. You caught all of the points that you could without meeting the man yourself." Gil watched Nick wince when he took a particularly deep breath in. "Which I wouldn't wish on anyone."

"We'll get him, Griss. And Lecter," Nick replied looking at him with a concerned expression. "We're gonna get this one. We're all pushing it. We stick together and we can beat both of them, right?"

"Maybe," Gil said, and only because he didn't want to take away all of their hope. "Or we can hope them get each other."

That would be a good outcome, as long as they didn't get anyone else in their convoluted enmity. Lecter was stupid to be doing this, why play a dangerous game? Aside from the thrill.

"Yeah, that would be a good result," Nick agreed, wincing a little as he shifted. "I'll be out of here tomorrow. Guess I'll be stuck in the lab with you for a while, huh?"

"That's not so bad. If no one tries to set the place on fire," Gil murmured trying to find the bright side when there really wasn't one.

"If that happens, you can carry me out the building, okay? No, wait, I'll take Greg and you can have Archie," Nick smiled at him again. "It's gonna be okay, Griss, really."

"Keep telling him that, Stokes, he might believe you in a few years," Jim's voice came from the doorway. "Nice work, Nick."

"I might believe you," Gil agreed, mouth twitching a little while he turned to peer at Jim as he came in. "Nick was just talking about throwing himself in front of a truck again. He might listen to you if you tell him it's a bad idea."

"Nick, it's an extreme sport taken too far," Jim reproached him dryly. "I thought we'd agreed not to
"How about necessary ones?" Nick asked looking up at him with a hopeful expression.

"Hell, I'm fine with those."

"I feel like the victim of an anti-sanity conspiracy." Gil mock-groaned that, watching the way that Nick's face lit up. "Nick, I want you to concentrate on being better. And you should probably try not to be alone for a while. Stick with Warrick or someone, because if you saw Millander's face, then Millander saw you."

"Yeah, well, hate to say it, Griss, but I don't think he was after me," Nick admitted. "Warrick says Greg is going to stay at my place, and he's going over to be with Catherine and they've invited Sara over, too."

That was good, because Gil wasn't going to invite Sara to stay with him and Jim, not unless Gil had a sudden inexplicable hankering to experience World War III in a hotel room. "Good. Just in case, Nick. You're all going to become targets as much as I am."

"I think everyone worked that one out," Nick said ruefully. "We'll look out for each other. And Brass is covering your back, right?"


Comfortably. In bed, no less, which made Gil have to press down a smile. "So don't worry. We're going to get this wrapped up as soon as we can, and with minimal FBI involvement."

"Great," Nick managed as a nurse headed into the room. He looked at them a bit ruefully. "Uh, I've got a feeling I might need some privacy for this, guys."

Jim half smiled. "C'mon, Gil, no one deserves to pee in a bedpan in front of his boss. You usually let them go into another room to do it."

Gil got to his feet, watching Nick for a moment. "We'll see you when you're out, Nick. There's an officer posted at the door, so you can rest easy."

As easily as someone could with fractured ribs.

Nick raised his hand in a farewell. "See you back at the lab," he managed as they left the room, and Brass shifted in closer to Gil.

"He's a good kid. Remind me to get him a Christmas present this year."

"They're all good. All of them," Gil murmured once they were out in the hallway. "I don't want anything to happen to them."

"Yeah, and they don't want anything to happen to you either," Jim replied quietly. "And they'll do something about it too. You gotta deal with that."

But he didn't want to. He'd rather have them not caring what happened to him rather than see Nick in a hospital bed because he'd saved his life.

There was no way to articulate it without getting into a circular argument, though. Yes, they cared, and he cared, so of course it made sense that they all cared, but Gil didn't understand why. And
maybe he never would. "I'm dealing."

"Uh-huh." Jim didn't sound like he believed him. "Nick's gonna be okay, we've survived the first move. Now we have to try and intercept the second."

"It's Lecter's move. It's fire, and fire isn't his style." Gil's jaw tightened a little, and he reached in his mind to get to what the next step would be. Fire. Fire seemed logical, and he'd already said that. He hadn't expected the car, but he'd already been expecting the fire, so that was Lecter's move. He couldn't track Millander, just Lecter, and what they needed was both reasoned out. Lecter wouldn't attack him, he'd move against Lecter.

Lecter really did think he was Will's god.

"No, so maybe he'll make it into something that is." Jim shrugged. "We'll get the bomb squad in to look over the department. I mean, come on, that verse in Job fits after the event. Not sure if we could have predicted that to a hit and run."

"He wouldn't use a bomb. It's too... inelegant. Too imprecise. Too brutish." Gil caught eye contact with a man passing them in the hall, and he watched the man's eyes catch and then slide away. Fear. Instinctively avoiding someone with that mark of fear lingering on them. "Can we talk about this in the car?"

"Sure," Jim replied patting him gently on the shoulder. "It's gonna be okay though, Gil. They'll mess up and we'll have them."

Gil wasn't sure if Jim was trying to persuade him or himself.

Maybe both. Maybe both of them, and hell, they both needed it. Gil walked a little closer to Jim, and fell quiet, because what could he do? Agree? Argue? Gil wasn't sure.

They seemed to think they would just solve this. There was no solving it unless they second guessed them and were there when one or other of them was setting something up. He was pretty sure if they caught one or other of them it would be the same as losing the game. And Lecter had been playing too long to make 'slip-ups' or mistakes. Although playing like this might be a mistake on one level.

Vanity. Or protection, or perhaps he'd just grown bored. Gil wasn't sure, and he could only keep in step with Jim and keep thinking when he got into the passenger seat of Jim's car. Lecter was protecting him, in a sense, in a way, in the way that a god could do whatever they wanted but didn't want other gods or demons to influence them. God's punishment was just, god's wrath without failing, and the devil's was unconscionable.

But then he was also sure that Millander thought he was playing God rather than the devil. That complicated things. Made it difficult who to pick doing what because both would play the role of God. And what could be next? There was a lot of references to destruction and violence in Job as well as rather stinging parallels to adultery and affairs that mirrored events in his life. Millander couldn't have known about that, surely.

It wasn't in any of the books. It wasn't, and there were no Job references in anything Lecter had ever done. It just fit too well, the implications the... and how was Gil to know that Millander wouldn't try to replicate some of that somehow?

He was forcing Lecter out of a pattern and Lecter was at his most dangerous when he was unpredictable.

They were outside now and he couldn't help but notice Jim put an arm around him and was very
cautious looking around. It was too soon for retaliation. They would be relying on news or other sources.

Lecter would strike once it hit the news, and it had just missed the Vegas news cycle. In the morning, the 6 a.m. news, it'd make that, and the locals already knew, but it was too late to air. Gil took comfort in that.

No doubt Lecter had some ideas, so he was thinking by the time they hit the next shift they would be facing the next onslaught.

"You okay, Gil?" Jim murmured quietly disturbing his train of thought.

"Thinking." They were at the car already, and he'd missed that. He needed to be observant, but he couldn't be, and that made him more of a liability than a use just then. Of all the times to wish he could just turn on Will Graham and off Gil Grissom, and just go with it. No hesitation.

"I could hear the cogs turning," Jim said as he opened the doors. "Lets get back to the Rampart, you need a break."

He needed Jim to stop him flying apart again.

And knowing that they couldn't do anything more just then, Gil caved in. He needed that strength, that quiet.

Before there was fire.

Gil was in the shower and Jim was trying to stop pacing. It was one thing to appear calm in front of Gil but they were going to head back in to the lab again and neither of them had slept that well. He was beginning to think leaving the country might be a good idea only he didn't trust either psycho not to follow them both. Nick had been nearly killed, he couldn't deny that and suddenly he couldn't help but think that this was way out of control. Fuck, maybe they should rethink this, only he didn't dare leave Gil alone.

Such was the state of his nerves he had a gun pulled the moment there was a knock at the door and approached it cautiously.

"Yeah?"

"Brass? It's Catherine." She didn't sound stressed, at least not more than she had in the past couple of weeks.

Safe enough then. He opened the door putting his gun back. "Hey, Cath. Grissom's having a shower." She was probably here to see him after all. "No news yet?"

"No news is good news." Catherine stepped in, and surprisingly enough, hugged him gently before she let him close the door. "We're waiting, and being careful. Warrick and Sara are on their way to the lab, and I was wondering if you two wanted a ride in."

"Sticking together is not a bad idea," Jim had to acknowledge. Cath looked tired, really tired and that was starting to worry him as well. He knew Gil had said things weren't her fault, but words tended not to be enough when it was that big a deal. "Nick coming in tomorrow?"
"He swears he is, and while I'm not sure it's a good idea..." Catherine shrugged as she moved to sit down in one of the chairs just inside of the room. "He can't hurt himself worse in the lab."

"Yeah, I guess. I'm working on that with Gil, too," Jim admitted sitting down as well "How was having Sara and Warrick over?"

"Interesting?" Catherine leaned to look towards the bedroom, and then back to Jim. "All she talked about was the case, and Gil. I think she's picked up on what's going on."

"On what?" Jim looked at her with his best innocent expression, though he was pretty sure he knew what Catherine was talking about.

"You know on what," Catherine murmured. "I think it's great. It's more than I ever wanted to think about your sex life in my life, but as long as someone isn't cowering in fear and panic..."

"It's not that kind of a sex life," Jim said raising an eyebrow at her. "I'm not making moves... it's just... picking up on a misunderstanding from a while back."

"I figured it was," Catherine filled in for him. "You picked up... pretty comfortably at the hospital." And why she was talking about that, Jim didn't know. Maybe it amused her. Maybe it distracted her, or maybe she just wanted to tease Gil a little, and Jim by relation.

"I'm a comfortable kinda guy," Jim said humoring her a little. "How're you doing, Cath?" Gil would be asking if he weren't in such a tailspin, so he guessed it was up to him.

"I'm... doing. I have no idea how someone can live like this, trying to keep one step ahead of it. Moving to Canada looks great right now."

"Well, I thought about that, a CSI commune up there, but you know... Nick might get mistaken for a Mountie or something or we might get snowed in and have to eat Sanders," Jim joked lightly. "And they might just follow us anyway. I'm better on my home turf."

"I just wonder if we're playing into their hands by letting things hit the news. Should we try to smother it instead? Get a lock down on the case, and let them play into a void?"

"Cath, we've got no hope in hell of smothering this," Jim said knowing it was true. "We'd end up with the press tripping over themselves, getting involved and Lecter has nothing holding him back from getting rid of a few of them. He got Dollarhyde to set light to one of them."

"I remember reading it." Catherine frowned a little, and peered towards the bathroom door. "Is he okay?"

"Gil? He feels responsible for Nicky," Jim admitted. No point hiding it, it was the truth. "He's worried what will happen to everyone else."

"But he's keeping it together?" Catherine was still watching the door, as if talking about Gil was enough to summon him. Jim wondered sometimes. "Crawford is just waiting for him to fall apart, because we're 'impeding his ability to work'."

"Gil knows what he can deal with," Jim said confident that it was true as long as someone was there to help him. Not that he was sure how he helped Gil, but he seemed to by just standing there. "He's doing what he can, and I just hope he doesn't push too hard. He's been through a hell of a lot."
"I just keep thinking that he was just assaulted by Millander. I still can't get that scene out of my head and he's carrying on like nothing happened because two crazies haven't given him the time to... heal. Whatever it is people do." And it'd catch up to Gil sometime, Jim figured. He'd be there when it did, when Gil stopped functioning from moment to moment. If he broke up again.

"Yeah. Don't worry, I'll be there. Not going anywhere if I can help it," Jim said as there was another knock at the door. Once again his gun was out and ready. "None of the others coming in after you?" he checked hastily.

Catherine shifted, and pulled her own gun out of her jacket, a motion that made Jim feel slightly proud. "No."

"Let's go rough up some hotel staff then," he said taking the lead. He wasn't going to tell her to stay put, because they needed to be ready right now. On guard enough to feel comfortable pulling a gun.

He went to the door and stood to one side. "Yeah who is it?"

"Flower delivery."

Catherine went to stand to the side that was behind the door, and made a 'yeah, right' sound.

"Could be Millander could be Lecter. Maybe he could get the drop on one or other of them. Jim opened the door, his gun at hip level. Shooting a serial killer in the groin would be satisfying if he got the chance. "Flowers, hey? Who from?"

It wasn't either of them. It was some kid with spiky hair who could've been a visual friend of Sanders. "Uh, whoa dude. I don't get paid for robbery, and I don't have anything on me. I'm just from a flower shop."

"Which flower shop?" Catherine asked immediately even as Jim gave the flowers a visual once over. No mysterious wires, flashing lights or ticking sounds. In fact they looked a lot like a funeral spray. Great, just fucking great.

"Who're they addressed to?"

"A Paul Millander?" He eyed Jim like he was wondering if he was him. "I'm from Fleet florist down off of Main."

Jim exhaled a moment. Lecter's move or part of it. Looks like there wouldn't be a night of suspense after all. "Fine. Give it here then."

"Sure. Could I just--" the poor kid had probably wanted a tip, but with Jim's nerves, he got a door shut in his face, and Catherine locking the door before Jim could make the motion.

"Griss?" Catherine headed for the bathroom door, knocking lightly.

"Fucking funeral flowers," Jim muttered under his breath double checking them for any sort of trap. Looked like the note was the message. Great. He opened up the note carefully and sighed when he saw the telltale numbers "31:15. Great."

"What's happened?" The sound of running water stopped, and Jim could hear bare feet squeaking on
"Lecter sent us funeral flowers."

He could imagine Gil's reaction to that. It was going through his own mind. Was it someone he had killed or someone he was intending to kill? Was it one of them? The only clue lay in those numbers and Jim was seriously considering taking a Bible with him everywhere now for reference purposes. "It says 31:15 Gil. Ring any bells?"

"I... hold on." He could hear Gil rustling around in there, probably drying off and pulling clothes on. "Catherine, that's you out there? Is everyone here?"

"Just Catherine, Gil, she dropped by on her way in," Jim called back. "Greg's with Nick, Sara and Warrick went in together."

"Okay." There was a pause, and a quiet thump. "Okay. Hold on..."

Catherine shook her head, and wandered away from the door a little. "He's never liked to quote when he's not face to face. Gil, just put a robe on, you'll catch a cold if you put your clothes on wet!"

Jim tried not to smirk a little as they waited for Gil to come out. "Steal one of the hotel ones, Gil." He knew Grissom would be wary about showing his chest or torso to Catherine, even though Catherine had seen him when it had just happened and from the sounds of it the image was still there in her head.

There was some noise of assent, and then the door cracked open. Gil was toweling his hair off, the belt tied tight around his waist from one of those hospital robes. "Did not he that made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb?"

Catherine looked at them both. "Wild guess here, we're talking about a woman right? Wombs, uterus all that female plumbing?"

Jim shrugged a little. Did that mean he was after one of the females in the team? "It was addressed to Paul Millander, though, not to us."

"If it was addressed to us, I'd make the leap that he'd killed Paul," Gil offered, still rubbing through his hair with the towel. "As a message that he was going to continue the game solo. But since it was addressed to Millander, then... The message was for him."

"So not about one of us then?" Catherine asked. "Funeral flowers, cryptic messages about wombs..."

Jim considered it. "Talks about making in wombs. Millander's mother still alive?"

"Nick interviewed her with..." Gil trailed off, probably because he couldn't remember. And while that probably startled Catherine a little, Jim was getting used to that, to Gil missing things. Maybe that was how he fell apart, coped with everything that was going on. Jim couldn't be sure.

He was allowed a few moments to kick himself back into gear. "Maybe it's a question of whether she's alive now?" he asked. "And either way it might just draw Millander back to their house. It's the best lead we've had."

So it was a little cold, but he had some tough skin when it came to mayhem and murder.
Plus, it kinda seemed like the worst 'your momma' joke ever.

"Catherine, do you want to call ahead about that?" Gil murmured, turning to head into the bathroom.

"Yeah." Catherine looked at the exhibit A in the room. "Can we bag this and take it in or do we need to deal with it here?" she asked aloud. "I can get my kit from the car."

"Bag it," Gil decided. He fell so easily into the role of supervisor, even when he looked rattled and wet. "But get a bag from your kit. I think they reuse the garbage bags here in the hotel."

"Right. I'll be back in a minute and I'll call on the way down. See if we've got a 4-19 or if we need to put protection on Mrs. Millander," Catherine said as she headed out the door. "You guys get ready, I'll take you in afterwards."

Jim was already ready, but he could probably give Gil a hand in getting dressed and getting a kit together just in case. Gil was already back stepping towards the bathroom.

"Right. We'll do that."

He was abandoned on both sides, left looking at the flowers. They'd have to send someone to the flower shop, get a description. See if it was Millander or someone he paid to do it. Maybe drive around the neighborhood bribing people with burgers again. It got results and people would spill for a burger where you couldn't get them to spill for ten dollars or more. He'd learned that trick in Jersey.

"You want me to get anything up together for you?" he called out to Gil in the bathroom.

There was a moment of silence from the bathroom, and Gil cracked open the door. "A Bible, my pants, and a pack of smokes?"

"You're smoking?" Jim asked moving to get the other items. "I thought you'd given up." Maybe he was thinking of getting back in touch with his Will Graham side.

Jim wasn't sure what he wanted to think of that. "I had. I'll give it up again. I'm missing something, and I can't think."

"And smoking will get it back?" Jim asked as he picked up the book Gil had been using as a reference and then found his pants. "Here, your pants. Sure it's not those you're missing?"

"I don't know. I'm just... missing something." Gil reached through the door for his pants, but not in a saving his modesty way. More of a 'the air-conditioning in that room is cold without pants' way.

"Gil, I've got to point this out. You were seriously injured and attacked not that long ago and you had a couple of near misses in the last couple of days. I think I'd be a bit distracted too."

God only knew why Gil thought he had to be perfectly fixed immediately.

"I don't have time to be distracted. They're going to kill one of us, and I can't let that happen." There was a thread of strain in Gil's voice, and Jim could hear him pulling his pants on, see the motions a little. "You're not getting it. I can't just shut this off and I can't just let it fall apart on me. I have to figure this out."

Okay, not so good. "I do get that, I just don't want you thinking that everything that happens is your responsibility." He moved forward to push open the door carefully. "I'm here, okay? I may not be a
whole lot of use but I'm here."

"I know." Gil's fingers faltered a little as he zipped up his fly, and started to buckle his belt. His hands were shaking. "I almost wish you weren't, and then you wouldn't be in the line of fire. You are. You think you're protecting me, but Lecter won't hurt me. Staying close is what's protecting you."

"Well, hey, great," Jim said reaching to rest a hand on his shoulder. "I'll stick close and pretend to protect you then, huh?"

Gil didn't smile. He reached his arm out, and hugged Jim tightly for just a minute. "God dammit."

"By the way, I think pretty much everyone knows about my own particular brand of close support," Jim murmured holding him close again. Gil obviously needed that more than he had ever hinted at in the past.

Gil managed a tired-sounding snort of a laugh. Yeah, like he cared, when half the lab already knew that he'd had sex with Lecter. Jim was twenty steps up from that, he hoped, so it wasn't like anyone they knew was going to have a problem with it.

"C'mon," Jim said with his own smile as he heard Catherine come back in. "You know how impatient these redheads can get."

"I heard that Brass," came the warning voice from the outer room.

Jim smirked again and kissed Gil lightly. "See what I mean?"

Maybe he could get Gil around this without having to resort to smoking again. Who knew? They might be able to lie in wait for Millander if Lecter had been warning them. They just had to stay optimistic about this, no matter what the facts said.

That seemed to be enough to get Gil moving again. Jim wasn't sure how much Catherine had heard, or quite when she'd let herself back in, but it didn't matter. Gil was holding together, and they were probably, probably all still going to be alive.

He'd dragged Nick in and propped him up in one of the labs before heading down to his own lab to kick the ass of the backlog. It was a backlog that needed some heavy duty paced music to keep him moving, processing and pushing all the time without a break. It always worked doing it that way. It allowed him to keep the adrenaline going and the blood pumping and he'd just set off the last of overlap before he had his first visitor of the day.

Greg was pretty worried about everything that was going on. Nick really shouldn't have been in and he'd spent his off-time helping him out. The guy was black and blue with bruises and what with him and Grissom, things were way too personal.

Everything was way too personal.

After all, shouldn't a place associated with the sheriff's office, and thus the people who worked in it, be safe from everything except run of the mill gunfire? Weird enough everything that had happened to Grissom, who was moving around the office like a lurking ghost, but now Nick.

That just crossed a line for Greg.
Of course, it was a personal and somewhat secret line and one that he hardly ever acknowledged except when he was tripping over it by crossing it one way or another, but Nick had been hurt, and he was being stoic and a good house guest and could barely move for bruises.

Least he could do was make him a few drinks, bring him food, and make sure he was okay. And see if he could nail this Millander bastard Nick was obsessing over just like everyone else was obsessing over Lecter. Between the two of them they had turned CSI into a paranoid, over-focused twitchy mess. If he could pull anything to help that, he was there. Pipette at the ready.

Except that DNA wasn't doing them much good, and while he could keep on top of the other cases, he wasn't much good to the current one. Trace, now, he had more of a chance helping with trace, and lo and behold, he was qualified and pretty damn good at trace, too.

So, he was up to help them process that in double quick time and they hadn't disappointed. Nick had said something about there being a new murder -- Paul Millander's mother. That had been the big news yesterday and he was expecting to have the trace in waiting for him, but it must have been bagged and tagged in evidence or something. It gave him a chance to breathe and legitimately clear the rest of his cases.

No matter what the media thought, it wasn't the only case in Vegas. There were other dead people, other people with murdered families who'd want answers as soon as possible, and who weren't going to get them as fast as the lab usually managed.

But he was rocking and rolling, CODIS was burning through the data. He was so damn good at this he was flying.

Greg grinned as the last batch of print outs rattled out from the spectrometer.

He sat back contemplating grabbing a coffee. "I'm good," he murmured pulling the read out free with a flourish and giving it a look. He liked to guess if this piece of evidence was something important or whether it was just background. Nothing much this time.

But sometime, sometime soon, he'd look and boom, important stuff. Not that Grissom would call anything unimportant, because it all mattered. Every little bit, big and small... Never mind that Grissom had been hiding a lot of big things. Greg still wasn't sure what to think of it. That waffled between freak-out and wow.

Grissom had been Graham, Graham had been the top authority on serial killers and crime scene empathy and... All the stuff that Grissom dismissed. Which he understood, knowing some of the history, but there was all the other stuff like the fact that he'd slept with Lecter, Lecter trying to kill him, and his family and having to leave all that. Greg wanted to be able to say something to him, to try and... well he wasn't sure what he wanted to say but something that might make it better. But he was so good at saying something stupid when they were busy he'd ended up saying nothing.

He could just say something like, "I know and it's cool... anything I can do?" but it sounded lame and he was just a lab tech, not one of the CSIs.

Hell, for all he knew, Grissom appreciated lack of comments the most. He'd always been secretive, and now he seemed like a ghost, with Captain Brass, bam, right there in the way all the time.

"Hey, Sanders?"

He looked up a little startled and smiled "Hey, Sara, you got a secret sense for when I've finished a
batch or something?"

He flirted with Sara and she shot him down. It passed the time away and was better and less obvious than flirting with Nick or Warrick. He was equal opportunity when it came to flirting. And pretty much equal opportunity when it came to getting successful from it.

Or equally... lacking in opportunity? Equal not-opportunity, yeah.

"I might. So, you're in trace today? Nice. You want to tackle this batch, Speedy?"

"Would this be the evidence from the Mrs. Millander killing? Because I'm up for that," He said immediately looking at the containers and vial she had bagged. "So dayshift didn't touch them?"

"Covallo says no. We're on it, and dayshift is working a lot of our usual stuff until then. I guess because we're on TV less often than Ecklie." Sara offered them to him, sliding them onto the table. "I know it's a lot."

"I cleared my backlog for this," Greg said absently picking up a bag and peering at it. "So what's the word on it all? You worked that scene, right?" He absently sorted things into piles for priority of processing as he glanced up at her. He wanted to know -- he always wanted to know where what he did fitted in. It was so much more satisfying then an information dead end.

Maybe that was why the dayshift guys were such deadheads about their work. "Well, she was cut up like a Christmas turkey. Literally."

Greg grimaced. "Hope there wasn't any stuffing involved." It was a lame thing to say but he tended to blurt out the first thing that came into his head to cover his shock. Sara always looks so cool about it. "So I've got the usual in swabs, DNA stomach contents and hairs right?"

"Yeah. I don't know what you're going to find in the stomach contents. We're looking for fiber, anything that shows she was alive and tortured before she was killed. Because he did stuff her chest cavity with 'Pauline's' childhood dresses." Sara looked faintly sickened herself, so it was okay to be shocked. That made it okay.

"Wow." He looked at the bags on the table and decided the stomach contents must be in the big envelope with a box container that sloshed. The bag was a bit opaque so he couldn't see properly but he'd have a look at that first. "So this was Lecter getting back at Millander, right? Which makes it Millander's next move?"

And his last one had been nearly to kill Nick. Who knew what he would do in retaliation for his mother being killed?

"According to Grissom and common sense. Griss is in his office trying to predict what the next move might be, but translating Bible verses to sociopathy is a stretch even for him." Sara's voice dipped a little low when she said that last bit.

"Well, hey he used to be good at it, right? The best... so if it can be done... it will be," Greg replied looking at her. "I'm amazed he's back so soon, really. I mean, it's probably been really tough for him. The attack and then all the Lecter stuff stirred up."

She shrugged a little. "He seems all right with it. Brass has been keeping an eye on him since it happened." Sara looked thoughtful, though. Well, hey, maybe he'd given her some food for thought. "I'll leave you with the trace, all right?"
"Sure. Thanks for bringing it up." He turned his attention to the opaque bag with the stomach contents in as Sara turned to walk out. It felt pretty heavy, but maybe there was undigested food in it. That sometimes happened. He pulled the box out, not recognizing the evidence seal. And it seemed to be stuck to the opaque bag, so he pulled on it and...

Boom! There was a stinging pain all over his hands chest and face, Liquid splashed against him and a puff of white power billowed around his head. He'd thrown himself back but he was frozen for a moment as he tried to work out what had happened. There were slivers of plastic piercing through everything and...

Oh god. Oh fucking god. It had to be some sort of biological contaminant. Shaking, he tried to remember what to do and staggered over to.... hit the alarm and seal the doors.

"Greg!" Sara was just on the other side, and she had her hand on the door handle. "Greg, are you all right?!

"No. Stay... stay away Sara. Get away from the door!" Greg shouted at her. He could see blood dribbling down the inside and outside of his latex gloves. Whatever was in there was in his blood stream and fast. He coughed as the powder drifted down. He hit the alarm. "Something in that batch of evidence was rigged. Or something... it exploded. There was powder and... Shit, Sara... DON'T even think about opening that door!"

"Greg, I..." Something. She something, but she started to back away, and yelled for help, even though it was already coming and the trace room was now akin to a zoo from all of the noise. It wasn't like the lab was a place where the sound of an explosion was going to be missed.

"Fuck." Greg looked at himself in the reflection from the glass, and then had to look down at his chest and face. He had to get whatever this stuff was off of him. As much as possible. Nearly panicking now he rushed over to the sink and tried pulling off his gloves. It was like pulling out a tree full of splinters and bits of the plastic pinged and bounced into the sink as he plunged his hands in and tried flushing the skin clean, and the blood. Least it wasn't acid.

And at least it was mostly on his hands. That was something, and the explosion hadn't been so bad. It was the puff of white powder that worried him more, and he tried to think of what it might be.

In the wake of the terrorism scares, he knew what it could be. Anthrax used a white powder to carry the spores. Or some sort of chemical, but if it were chemical he'd be feeling it immediately. In his lungs. He pulled off his lab coat frantically, then his t-shirt, ruthlessly pulling the bits out, leaving himself half naked and bloody.

Ricin? Could be. You could make Ricin at home. Great choices. Anthrax or Ricin. Or it could just be a scare tactic. If it was, it was working. He was scared shitless.

He really didn't want to die, and the more he picked at the pieces, the more his hands shook and god, fuck, he was scared, he didn't want to die just because he'd been trying to do his god-damned job and liking it. All he'd done was open an evidence bag; he shouldn't have ended up bleeding and trying to ignore everyone on the other side of the door.

He was as clean and scrubbed as he could get, still shaking, still terrified when he looked back up to see who was out there. He hadn't dared for fear he would crack and run out there, spread whatever it was around all of them. He didn't know what to say or do, but there stood Grissom, and Nick, Sara, Warrick, Catherine. All out there staring in...

"Hey." He raised a faintly bleeding hand to wave at them, not knowing what to do.
"Greg?" Grissom, leaning against the glass and enunciating clearly. He still had to shout a little to be heard through the glass. "The Hazmat team is coming, okay?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Thanks." He was not going to cry in front of them all. He was not going to freak out and fall to pieces. Okay he was going to freak out but he wasn't going to go to pieces. He looked around at the mess on the table and floor and saw a slip of paper there. It was laminated so hadn't been destroyed so he half put on some gloves -- one glove -- and picked it up. "There's a message," he said aloud looking up at Grissom and Nick. "It's got, 'Tell Lecter thanks, I was getting around to dealing with that bit of business,' and on the other side it says 30:30."

Maybe it was a verse that said "... and we shall scare the lab techs, but they will not be harmed.' The Bible needed a verse like that.

Gil didn't tell him what it was, though. He just frowned, and maybe there was a glimmer of wet in Gil's eyes. Greg wasn't sure, but it made him want to drop the stupid card. Grissom stepped back from the window for a moment, and his lips moved, saying something that Greg couldn't hear. Probably needed, definitely wanted to hear. Then he stepped up to the glass again. "Greg? Just put the card down. It's okay. Your wallet and everything is in your locker, right?"

What a weird question, but yeah.

"Yeah. It's all in there. Why?" He put the card down and moved closer to the door. "What is it? Do you know something?" He looked at the others. "Sara? Nicky?"

Nick opened his mouth, and he definitely looked near to tears now. "The verse says, 'My skin is black upon me, and my bones are burned with heat.'" Gil mouthed it along with Nick, but didn't say it aloud again.

And when he did speak, Greg wished he hadn't. "I think it's Anthrax, Greg."

Black necrotic sores, high fever, yeah. He looked down at his hands, as his treacherously good recall flooded him with facts. Cutaneous Anthrax not too bad 1% fatalities with treatment. Gastrointestinal up to sixty percent fatalities. Inhalation.... inhalation...

He swallowed a little. Four out of five died. But not contagious. Only by direct infection so just... him.

"Oh." He didn't have to see himself in the glass to know he'd gone white. "Anthrax. Okay."

He wanted out of the room so badly, from breathing in more and more of the stuff. "When will Hazmat be here?"

His voice was only wobbling a bit. He was proud of that.

"Soo--" Gil stopped, and leaned back for a moment before he leaned forwards to the glass again. "Now. You're going to be okay, Greg. We have to go now so they can seal the hall off to get to you. Nick's going to meet you at the hospital with your medical card, okay?" They'd probably be busy burning everything that was in the room, he guessed. Or however they got rid of Anthrax.

"Yeah. It's okay Griss. It'll be okay." He tried to smile at him even as he just sat down against the table before his legs folded up on him. He had a suspicion that decontamination was not going to be pleasant.
Then there were men in suits, full body hazmat suits herding the group of them deeper into the lab instead of outside. But they all went, and Nick watched Greg over his shoulder until they turned the corner.

He was alone for a moment and he desperately wanted to give in to the fear. He was shaking, desperately scared. Four out of five chances in a few days he'd be dead. It could have been him and anyone else. It was usually the CSIs who opened the bags. They usually did some themselves. Just because he volunteered... He volunteered. And Nick had looked scared for him. Maybe that meant something? Something to hold on for if he could.

He just sat there thinking until they were done putting up sterile areas, impromptu showers. Until they came in and stripped him off completely and hosed him down. Scrubbing him so every cut stung with industrial strength decontaminant. He didn't even speak when they took him in a specially sealed van away from CSI.

He didn't have anything left to say.

He was tired.

Under normal circumstances, it was time to cut, to stop, to go away for a few hours, get on a ride and just let the release come. But that wasn't happening, and the media had camped outside, and Greg had been almost killed, might still die, and...

And that explained why he was on the roof of the building. They had a nice flat roof, and he needed the fresh air or at least, that was what he'd told Catherine before he'd gotten up there.

What he was looking for was someone with a cigarette. Jim had evaded it and he understood why, but he was desperate to get the feel of Will back in his head because Will would know what Lecter would do in response. And they had to know because there would be public hysteria. Anthrax was like terrorism and all hell was breaking loose as it hit the news.

Nick had called, sounding choked. He'd said they were pretty sure it was Anthrax even though they were waiting for the cultures. Greg had lesions coming up on his arms and chest like big ugly bug bites. None of them had started with the black necrosis that he had immediately connected to the verse in his head, but they would. He was throwing up a lot and had a fever that was steadily climbing.

But he wasn't having respiratory problems. That was good. It was looking like he didn't have respiratory Anthrax after all. Not that the other forms were that much more survivable.

A little hope was better than no hope at all, and Gil would grasp onto what he could as long as there was the opportunity for it. Greg would survive. He had to keep telling himself that so he wouldn't think too long on it. Greg would survive and Nick was going to be all right, and none of them were leaving the lab anymore, simple as that. Sheriff Mobley's orders even if it was the first smart thing he'd said in years.

"I thought I'd find you up here." Jack. He'd arrived sometime after the crisis and been rushing around the lab. "That and I asked Catherine and she told me you were in the basement."

"Wouldn't be the first time that I'd camped out in an evidence locker." Gil didn't turn around. He could hear Jack tromping across the roof, could hear him walking through the roof dust, and
wondered if he knew it was never going to come off of his clothes.

"No, it wouldn't. Anyway, in my vast experience of human behavior I headed up to the roof," Jack came over and leaned against the edge looking out over Vegas. "How's the kid?"

"They know it's Anthrax, but they don't think it's respiratory. The powder was probably a decoy to tell him what he was in for." Gil rolled his shoulders, and then turned to look at Jack. "Do you have a cigarette?"

"Yeah. Stopped carrying around a packet just for you, Will," Jack said handing him one of his.
"Thought you'd given up."

"I had." He reached for it, and watched Jack pull one out for himself, watched him light it. "Sometimes I start up again. Today seemed like a good day for it."

Jack offered up the lighter to him. "It's a circus outside. Complete mayhem. The media is having a feeding frenzy -- no chance of Lecter not knowing about Millander's move. Shame about the kid, though. He did good work."

He felt the urge to thump Jack again. Sometimes the past tense was not appropriate

"Does. He does good work. He's one of our best techs." Gil breathed in, and could feel the spreading warmth in his lungs when the tip caught. Smoking was like riding a bicycle, something else Gil could take a little comfort in. He had a piece of the puzzle in his head waiting to place. There were too many parts of Job that could be relevant in the past. Things he had suspicions about. There were verses that would be apt if they hadn't already occurred before so he had to ask even though he had spent decades avoiding the answer he knew was probably there. "Hey, Jack? Molly cheated on me, didn't she? With Hannibal. I know she'd tell you if she did, and not me."

Jack looked a little uncomfortable and there was an answer of yes even before he said anything. "It's a long time ago, Will. You and Molly were having a rough time anyway and..." He shrugged a little. "Seemed like the last thing you needed to know."

"It was." He wasn't going to hold it against Jack, though. Couldn't, because he'd cheated on her, and she knew it. And she'd been everything to him, and... And he'd never been good at relationships. Gil took another inhalation. "It fits in the verses. After the blackened skin one. There's a swathe of verses that've happened."

"So, what, if they've happened then they're eliminated?" Jack seemed interested and it was strange how the smell and taste of the cigarette took him back all those years. He could feel himself drifting back, his thoughts marshaling up the way he wanted them to. Will had always been wounded; he knew how to be hurt better than Gil did. Knew how to carry on better when he was this way.

Will's life had always been falling apart on him. And Gil... Gil just hadn't had a life.

He exhaled through his nose, and took in another breath, nursing it a little faster than he wanted to. "As far as Lecter is concerned? Yes, and it's his move to make now. He had it over me, he had it over Molly, we were ruined, that leaves..."

What did that leave? Fire. That was the one neither had gone for and was written in Job like a goddamn invitation.

He was thinking like Will. He hadn't thought goddamn in a long time.
"What's the next move, Will? We might get there, we could get there in time. C'mon, the rest of us are just amateurs compared to you when it comes to Lecter," Jack was saying pouring on flattery like it was going out of fashion.

"Flattery, Jack." Gil took another breath, and closed his eyes. He didn't want to see Vegas, and he didn't want to see those reporters out there in the parking lot or their fucking news team vans. Carrion birds. What would the move entail? Tit for tat, oblique mirroring playing off of each other. Paul had mirrored Lecter's last efforts in attacking Gil's family by imperiling his current 'family' starting with Nick, then Lecter had struck back at Millander's family with the murder of his mother. Then Millander had hit at the family in Gil's 'home' and that meant the logical counter move was

"Fire. With Lecter acting as our deranged white knight... Family. Fire and family, Jack, shit, he's going to attack the Masons."

"Millander's family?" Jack straightened up. "Lecter's going there?"

As soon as he'd said it, he'd felt a rightness about it, the certainty he felt when he teetered right on the edge of Lecter's mindset. It nearly made him feel dizzy. The fire verse was finally claimed

'Itf mine heart have been deceived by a woman, or if I have laid wait at my neighbor's door, Then let my wife grind unto another, and let others bow down upon her. For this is an heinous crime; yea, it is an iniquity to be punished by the judges. For it is a fire that consumeth to destruction, and would root out all mine increase.'

It didn't just fit him, it fit Millander who had been a woman that deceived as well as committing adultery in his rape. And God, there was even the ironic twist of it being an iniquity to be punished by judges. The fiery destruction of house and home and any legacy was the punishment and he knew it would appeal to Lecter's warped sense of humor.

"Are you talking about now?"

"Yes, now!" Gil turned to head back towards the stairwell, and found himself breaking into a run. "Their police department needs to send someone out there right now, get them out of the house."

"Are you kidding? They've got the force out on the streets trying to stop panic. We'll have to go," Jack said. "Who can we get a hold of from here?" He ran after him, catching him up as they reached the door.

"I don't know -- Jim? Jim's out on the roads, with Warrick. They were heading out past..." Well, near enough to where Millander lived. Gil stopped, just outside of the door, and juggled his cigarette long enough to get his cell phone out. Why the hell was he running for a phone when he had a cell phone?

"Brass? If they're out there then call them, Will," Jack said as if that hadn't been the idea all along.

He was already pressing the speed dial and willing Jim to pick up.

"Brass," Jim answered sounding like they were driving.

Road noise had never sounded so good. "Jim? I need you to go to 372 Mulberry Drive. Out in Mulberry. Right now. It's the Millander's home, okay? I think Lecter is going to attack them. And if they're still there, get them out. I'm going to call the Mulberry town police, but I think you might be closer."
"Yeah... yeah we probably are. We were on our way back. Millander's home?" Jim seemed to take it in his stride. "We're on our way, Gil. I'll let you know what's happening."

"Thanks. Be careful." Gil hung up, and then shoved his phone to Jack. "You call the locals. They'll listen to you faster."

"You want to try and get there, too, or wait it out?" Jack asked even as he took the phone and started dialing numbers.

"Are you driving?" Windows cracked so they didn't smoke themselves out, but Gil was game. And Jack was going to jump on it.

"Hell, yeah. If we slip out the back, we might beat Brass to it," he said with a grin. "Come on, Will, let's do it."

Gil nodded, and started down the stairs. Jack'd catch up with him, and together they could get to Jack's vehicle out in the parking lot. They'd get there, they'd get close to there. And they'd do what they could.

The problem was that he had too much faith in Gil. Even as he floored it to get to that address to the point where Warrick was clutching at the seat to hold on, he didn't for a moment think that Gil could be wrong.

In fact, in his head, it was laughable. He realized as they ran a few lights that he couldn't think of a moment when at the crux of the matter if Gil had said something was the case, he had done anything except just went with it.

The worse thing was, as they turned in and headed up towards Millander's family home -- the Judge Mason family home, he could see the flicker of orange light behind the windows.

"He's already started it. 'Rick, you've got your gun, right?" He said urgently even as they pulled to a halt and he unbuckled himself and reached for his own.

Warrick had unbuckled his seat belt before they'd even stopped. "Shit, yes." And he had the door open before Jim put the car in park. Warrick was almost not-CSI, almost cop material if he didn't spend so much time looking for details.

"It moves, you shoot. Somehow I don't think the mother and kid will be moving," Jim said and they were out of the car. "We go in together."

Ordinarily they split up, but Lecter was more than capable of taking down someone on their own, and two might stand a chance. "We see if they're alive first, cover your mouth and keep low."

Teaching his grandmother to suck eggs there. The CSIs knew more about fire hazard than most. But he started running up to the house, smelling gas outside even as they approached.

Warrick shot Jim a glance, and shadowed him as Jim took the lead. No sense in calling a warning into the place before he kicked the door down, it wasn't as if, if there was anyone behind the door they'd be alive to hear him.

He checked the door for heat and then kicked it sharply, moving inside like he had done on numerous times in the past. It was a knack never lost once it was gained. The living room was
smoky, and fire flickered in the corner. They wouldn't have long before the whole place was a death trap. He moved to check in the kitchen.

Open window again, and the tools of the trade were already there. "Jim?" Warrick bumped shoulders with him. "C'mon, we can't get the evidence and the people."

"I know, had to make sure they weren't down here. He has a thing for kitchens," Jim replied. That's what he had read between the lines. A lot of Lecter action had some of the crime going on in kitchens. "Stairs... Careful, he might still be in the house."

More than likely if the gear was still here and fire just set. They turned and headed up the stairs where the smoke was thicker and they could hear the crackle of flames.

Jim wanted to be cautious, but he also didn't want to be a corpse, so he moved at a fast jog, gun held out on front of him, knocking open doors as he went, peering in and then blowing past.

"Hey, hey -- got the kid on the floor in here -- keep going, look for his wife."

"Get the kid out, I'll find her," Jim replied and he was heading into flames now, the heat strong enough to make his skin feel like it was shriveling. He tried breathing through his sleeve, starting to get disorientated by the ever moving smoke that was sinking lower. He found a door and hoped to hell it wasn't the bathroom because he was right to the edge now and he'd have to go after this room or fry in the house.

He kicked the door, and moved into a blazing bedroom. Dimly he could see a woman lying loose limbed on the bed and ran and hopped over fire to her. He swung her onto his shoulder and grabbed a rag for his own mouth. Stinging drips of fire and floating embers touched him as he ran as fast as he could from the room, trying to remember the way out. He really hoped Warrick was out safe.

This was going on the list of stupidest things he'd ever done in his life. Like that needed to get any longer, and he hadn't ever been more glad to be at least a little strong, stocky and solid, as he was then.

That and Millander had married a lightweight. It made it easier for Jim when he thundered down the stairs, heading full stumbling, tripping tilt for the door.

He was out and gasping for fresh air even as his streaming eyes took in the detail. The lawn was on fire, Warrick and the kid were down and there was a man standing over him as if he was going to do something else and he pulled his gun and bellowed, "Lecter!" even as he tried to get a clear shot when carrying someone. Impossible. He fired anyway, hoping to get lucky.

It left him unbalanced, and there was a moment where he was sure he'd had his target, but he was losing his footing, and it was set the woman down on the grass or fall over on top of her, and he went with the setting down part of the plan.

And when he looked up, there wasn't a sign of anyone else there. The bastard was probably lurking in the bushes.

He jogged over to Warrick, half crouching down next to him while trying to scan for movement. He glanced down quickly, felt for a pulse and was relieved to find a good strong one there. Looked like Warrick had taken a hit to the back of the head when he had been leaning over. He felt around... yeah, there it was. A literal thumping headache in the making. Lump and the stickiness of blood. He tried not to cough as he scanned the bushes carefully. Had Hannibal gone? Was he still there?

Fuck, what was that?
There was a smell, and a sound -- not just burning, but something burning nearby. Great, more fire and now he was the only one up and moving. Great, that was outnumbered right there.

There were numbers burning on the lawn.

"God fucking dammit," he looked at the numbers, the fire making the wobbly numbers 31:12 like some flashy Hollywood effect. "Lecter, you bastard! Come out with your hands up!"

Not that he expected him to do that, but at least he could say if there was an inquiry he had asked for him to surrender.

He had to say it at least for the sake of his own self respect. Of course there was no answer, and of course he hadn't really been expecting it.

There wasn't time for him to waste waiting. He had to move the incapacitated people off of the lawn and towards the car, or towards safety. No point in pulling people out of a burning building when it was still burning too close for comfort.

The kid and Warrick were closest. He could move them down to the far end of the lawn. He hoped they were still alive, that they hadn't just rescued corpses. They had to win one back against these two maniacs.

Bending and lifting made them worse and the house was well ablaze now. Enough gas had been thrown everywhere that it was going up like a firework. When he ran back for the mother, it was nearly too hot to get any closer as windows cracked under heat and the house gasped out fresh flames with the new oxygen.

He started coughing and it was hard to lift and drag at the same time even as he went back for Warrick finally, finally hearing the sound of sirens coming their way. "C'mon, 'Rick, move your lazy ass. You're... fuck... a lot heavier than those two..."

"Nhnn?" He twitched, and damn that was good, him moving, but there wasn't time for Warrick to regain his bearing because they had to get out of there now, yesterday. They needed to move, because those grass numbers were moving to pits of flame in the middle, starting to spread out towards them.

"Oh... crap. He had to get fucking fancy," Jim muttered and reached and lifted feeling muscles scream that lightweight wives and kids were pushing his luck but this was so far out the other side of his luck he might as well invest in traction for the next few months.

Nevertheless, Warrick was up and on his shoulder and the flames were... wow, just there all around him. Warrick reeked of gas and he had a horrible suspicion he'd interrupted Lecter pouring it all over him. Standing in the middle of fire, soaked in gasoline had to go down in his life as one of the stupidest situations he ever got into. That list was just getting longer and longer. Nothing for it, they had to go through.

Worst case scenario, there were blankets in the car and he could smother the flames on Warrick. He took one good, slightly fumy breath, and made a rush for it just when the fire trucks pulled up.

He was glad he had sparse hair anyway because he was sure he would have lost most of it. He protected his face and felt his eyebrows crisp and curl. And there was a whomp of a sound and he was on fire, Warrick was on fire and he dived for the ground to roll and beat the flames out even as the firemen ran up with proper blanket and practically smothered them both.

It was kinda nice under the fire blanket.
At least he wasn't on fire anymore, and hey, they were all alive, and Lecter hopefully hadn't killed anyone this time unless he'd given the Mason's some slow sedative poison.

He coughed a little and then decided emerging from under the fire blanket might be a good idea.

"You let me up now?" he asked the fireman who had been pinning him. Gil would have a fit if he saw him covered over like a corpse. Or Warrick. "How're the others?"

"We're looking over them now. Who're you, and what's going on?" The fireman stepped back a little, and offered Jim a hand up. "You probably have smoke inhalation."

"Captain Jim Brass..." He nearly said CSI and winced a little as he moved. "Homicide. That's CSI Warrick Brown and those other two were a couple of attempted murder victims. I think they've been drugged or something."

At least he hoped that stillness was drug induced. "Tell your men to be careful. You know the serial killer thing?"

The man looked startled but nodded.

"Yeah well, let's just say we interrupted one of them, okay?"

"Vegas PD?" the man pressed, getting Jim over towards the ambulance. They were probably short on masks.

"Yeah. Vegas. Look we were tipped off, okay? Were on our way back from another job." God, he ached, and he was sore. His paranoia had him checking the man over for ID automatically. "I expect some more of the Vegas guys to be here soon and the FBI."

"Great." And he seemed to genuinely mean it. "All right, can you sit right here? I need to get a mask."

He nodded, too tired suddenly to care anymore even as more and more flashing lights joined the throng outside. As long as they had got out, saved everyone. Narrow escapes all round. Maybe Gil would stay at the lab.

Nah. Who was he kidding?

Gil had sounded off when he'd called him, like he was headed somewhere or had just gotten somewhere. Gil waltzed into scenes that he shouldn't and he'd always done it, as long as Jim had been his boss.

It was just a matter of when.Apparently not before the fireman put an oxygen mask over his mouth.

That felt good. It cleared his head better than any drug and he sat back, looking at Warrick close next to him, stirring now with his own mask on.

"Warrick? You stopped playing sleeping beauty?"

"What hit me?" It sounded muffled, but it was definitely Warrick, sitting up a little even as the EMT tried to get him to sit back down.

"Well you know, you did your hero thing and then Lecter hit you over the back of the head," Jim said succinctly. "And then poured gas all over you and the kid."
"That's the last time I do a ride-along with you." That was almost a laugh. Almost.

"Jim?!

"The cavalry rather belatedly arrive," Jim said with all the dignity he could muster. He lifted the mask a moment and called out, "Here!" before he started coughing and had to put it back on. He looked at his hands. Christ he was probably covered in soot, and crap. He settled for sticking up his hand and waving them over.

Jack Crawford pointed at him, and pulled at Gil's coat sleeve, and they started towards him. He was... not hallucinating the little glow of a cigarette tip in Gil's hand, except it was there and gone and Gil paused to crunch something out on the dirt.

Jack Crawford was a bad influence.

It wasn't like he needed any more smoke. "Hey, Gil," he said waving a little as they got closer. "Rick and I ran the errand. We think we did okay."

Gil didn't stop and say hi or interrogate him, like he was expecting. The EMT seemed surprised that Jim was suddenly engulfed in a bear hug, and Gil muttering, "Jesus, what did I tell you about staying safe?"

"I think I hung up before I reached that part of the conversation," Jim murmured and hugged him back. "Warrick's the one that had the close encounter -- I just turned out to be a lousy shot."

Jack leaned forward. "Lecter was here when you were?"

Jim twisted his head. "Yeah. Hit Warrick over the head when he came out with the kid. I saw him when I came out with the wife and fired at him. Missed though."

Jack was already turning away bellowing orders to get agents to spread out and cover the perimeter. Jim figured he was safely in Serial Killer obsession land.

"You okay?"

Gil pulled back just a little, one eyebrow cocked while he looked at Jim. "You're asking me if I'm okay? You..." And then he leaned back in again, and it was the funniest thing. Maybe it wasn't supposed to be, but it was so strange for Jim. "You're okay. Don't do that again."

Jim tried not to laugh as he patted Gil's back. "Well that's a relief. I'll make a point of it. Though maybe on special occasions if I have the urge I might just run into a back yard with a smoking barbecue in it. Just for old time's sake."

Gil made a noise, and just stood there, hugging Jim. A guy could get used to that, except for that pesky oxygen mask, and Warrick sitting there, probably staring.

"I'm okay, Gil," he murmured. "We're okay. We scored one back on them both, thanks to you. We're finally catching up with them."

"Not soon enough." Gil pulled back a little, and looked at Warrick, finally, then frowned. "You two smell like gasoline."

"Lecter took objection to Warrick's aftershave. Decided he needed a new one," Jim replied flippantly. "How's the head, 'Rick?"
"Sore. I meant it when I said I'm not doing another ride along with you." He didn't sound like he meant it, and he was shaking his head when he said it. "Hey, are the Masons okay?"

"Assuming it's a sedative and not a fatal poison, yeah I think they are," Jim said with relief. It was assuming a lot but Lecter had a history of drugging not poisoning. He had to hope he was staying true to form.

Gil would know. Gil eyed the ambulances that they were being loaded onto, and he finally took a step back from Jim like he'd just realized what he was doing. "He doesn't kill women and children. He had to construct a situation that they could conceivably get out of alive."

"Assuming two ruggedly handsome law enforcement types turned up," Jim replied taking the mask off. His chest felt a bit better. "Yeah well, we still managed it, and managed not to get torched ourselves by a narrow margin. I still think we should all stay at the lab until this is over. How much further can it escalate for god's sake?"

He wanted to ignore the way that Gil turned his eyes away. "The next logical one is 31:22, if this was the fire. 'Then let mine arm fall from my shoulder blade, and mine arm be broken from the bone.'"

"Well that sounds like a whole load of fun," Jim said. "So we keep everyone under tabs, make sure Millander can't get in again. I still can't believe he managed to get in with that evidence. We'll have to get Nick back to the lab. He's too exposed out there with Sanders."

"Sanders is in a hospital, guarded. Nick being there raises Greg's chances of being safe," Gil reasoned quietly.

"He's not likely to go after Greg, Gil, not with the Anthrax. But he might just go for Nick if he's the only one of us out on a limb." It seemed obvious to him.

Gil seemed hesitant to go for it, and he looked around agitatedly for a moment before he leaned on the little edge of ledge that was beside Jim. "He didn't inflict all of the injuries on one part of Job, did he? No, he spread the suffering around. He's getting us one by one."

"So... what? Those of us who haven't had a close encounter? Who's that now?" Did the fire count? He wasn't sure. "Sara and Catherine?"

"If this counted for the both of you, I don't know. It'll get out to Millander, so he'll count it to the both of you. His move next." Gil folded his arms, looking like he was about to get lost in thought. "His mother's death delighted him. This will enrage him. This was the life genetics denied him, untouchable to outsiders."

"So maybe we score points for saving them? Maybe he'll back off." Jim suggested. It seemed a sensible idea to him but they were dealing with serial killers, so sensible was relative. "Look, maybe..."

He had a horrible suspicion. They were attacking each other's 'family' and when they ran out of options what next? Gil? Because Lecter was out of options already even if attempt had failed. Would that mean Millander would step things up?

Had to be. Things were coming to a head, which meant only one thing Jim could be sure of. They had to catch them soon.
And he didn't like the look on the face of the EMT who was coming back towards him. "Captain Brass, put that mask back on."

He put the mask back on, wondering if Gil had already reached that conclusion and whether he even preferred it to there being a risk to Sara or Catherine, or to stop Millander going back for seconds on Greg or Nicky. The best they could do was lock everyone down under guard and hope to god no one slipped up.

Gil reached behind his head, and adjusted the rubber band, and then repositioned himself, looking thoughtful. They'd go back to bunker mentality when the EMTs cleared him and Warrick.

He was meant to be working on some of the information on the case here at the hospital when Greg was being swabbed or, prodded and poked for what seemed like an eternity. He was finding it hard because he was watching Greg get sicker and sicker and waiting for these antibiotics to kick in and they just weren't doing anything.

It scared him. It scared him a lot even though he was allowed in now because Greg wasn't contagious, as long as he didn't make contact with any of the necrotic lesions, and they were all under wraps. Greg... wasn't doing so good. There was no hiding it. Four days from massive exposure and the disease was taking hold. He'd never seen anyone look so ill and still be breathing.

Greg probably mostly wasn't even coherent. And Nick couldn't blame him for sleeping and being passed out because hell, why would a guy want to be awake through that? Nick didn't want to be. Nick wished Greg weren't ill at all, wished that the nurses wouldn't give him funny looks like he was insane to even be there.

He just felt someone ought to be. Greg didn't have family here and when he'd been hurt he'd wondered what sort of hospitality Greg was going to give him when he offered and had been totally unprepared for how... caring Greg had been. Totally blew him away.

Not what he expected at all. Least he could do was be there for him. He watched as Greg rolled his head uncomfortably towards him and was a little surprised to hear a faint. "Hey, Nick. You still here?"

"Yeah. How're you feeling?" He asked that every time Greg had a little spark of life. It was the only thing he could ever think to say.

"Like shit," Greg replied, his voice hoarse and barely above a whisper. "How'm I looking?"

"Blotchy," Nick told him honestly. "And well bandaged."


It was difficult to know what he was remembering each time he came round. He wanted to pat him gently and reassure him but he couldn't even do that. He didn't want to press over one of his sores and make Greg hurt worse than he already was. "A lot. Everyone but me's been living in the lab."

"No one else hurt?"

He asked that every time, sometimes convinced that they were. For once his hair was sticking up for a real reason.
"Nah. We've been doing okay since the thing with Brass and Warrick and Millander's family." He left it vague in case Greg wanted to probe at it. He'd told Greg about it once already.

Greg frowned a little "The fire?" He sounded a bit vague but that was hopeful. "You're not at the lab."

"Nope. I'm here to watch out for you." He smiled at Greg, and tried to keep his eye contact.

Greg nearly managed a smile at that but it seemed like an effort to swallow. It faded off fast but he kept looking at him, almost desperately. "Nicky? I.... don't think I'm doing so good."

"Yeah, you are." And so what if he sounded a little desperate when he said it? Nick was allowed to feel sad and to try to keep smiling at Greg. "You're going to be okay, trust me. You've made it this long, and hey -- it's not respiratory."

Greg was quiet for a bit and then said. "I started throwing up blood today Nick... that's not a good thing." He was looking straight at him, and Nick was suddenly very afraid that Greg was giving up.

He slid his hand down, and checked Greg's fingers before he clutched at them. "Hey, you can't just give up, Greg. You have to hang in, okay? The nurse told me the antibiotics seemed to be starting to work."

"I'm tired," he whispered back but clutched at his hand desperately in response. "I... guess, I thought I'd never say or do anything but..." Greg looked at him again, his eyes dark and wistful against the whiteness of his drained complexion. "I figure you won't hit me on my deathbed." He swallowed again before he finally forced out the words. "I kinda like you."

"I kinda figured. And you're not on your deathbed." Nick shifted his fingers a little, and swallowed as well. "And you're going to be okay, Greg. You are."

"Not going to hit me?" Greg asked after a pause which amounted to amazement.

He looked so worried about that when he had so much else to worry about.

It was kind of stupid, and Nick would've laughed under better circumstances. "Nope. I kinda like you, too, okay?"

Greg just blinked at him and then said in a tone that nearly sounded normal. "Man, I really must be delirious."

"Good delirious, then. I mean it, okay?" Nick squeezed his fingers gently. "I'd show you, but if I got too close to you right now, I think the nurses will throw me down and tie me up."

"Can we save that until I get better?" Greg managed sounding a lot more positive if not louder.

"Yeah. When you get better, okay? Just... you have to get better," Nick told him, watching Greg's tired face. He was starting to sound positive, even if he was mumbling a little. "Think about where you want to go out and what you want to do, Greg."

"Stay in with you...." Greg managed another faint smile even as his eyelids drooped again. Sweat was beading his forehead and he grimaced at some pain he was feeling. "Stay with you."

"Okay. Then think about bad movies you want to put in the DVD player."

Even if Greg didn't
answer, anything to keep his mind going

"Bet... bet you like westerns...." Greg at least sounded like he was fighting it now, more than he was only a few minutes before. Some of the monitors were making a few odd beeps which worried him. He'd gotten used to them at that level.

"Yeah. You ever seen Fistful of Dynamite?" Nick asked, leaning forwards. If they changed much more, he'd poke his head out to get a nurse.

"No. I...." He seemed to lose concentration midway and then said in a low urgent voice. "Nick I'm going to be sick."

And when he got sick it wasn't just a heave of stomach and that was it, it tended to go on for hours or until he passed out.

Nick dove for a bedpan to offer Greg, and because he knew that wasn't going to be enough for long, kept to his feet and headed for the door. "Hold on, I'll get you a doctor."

Even as he left he heard the sounds of Greg painfully retching and hated the thought of him being in so much pain. They wouldn't let him in if Greg was being sick, just in case he splashed stomach contents. No, Greg would be attended to by people in hazmat fashion which he saw them hurry to get in to and head off en masse to Greg's room.

That left him out here, waiting again. Technically working if he could find somewhere to plug in the laptop he'd brought with him, because he wasn't going to be able to sleep, not knowing what Greg was going through.

He'd try back in an hour or so, probably peer into the window, and get shooed off again. But Nick was all right with that, and he shouldered his bag to head off in search of an outlet.

Maybe he could make a little headway in the Millander case.

Everyone else was calling it the Lecter case. The news had been full of it and the channel stayed the same for more than five minutes it was there. Duel of Death, Serial Killer Standoff, headlines one after another. With every day that went by after the first four things happening in quick succession, the anxiety notched up. The police were getting around a hundred Lecter or Millander 'sightings' a day. It was almost worse than useless.

Here would do. He could check his mail, see if they had anything new back at the lab, and send updates of how Greg was getting on. Although saying 'he's really sick' might cover it.

That was probably about all that anyone needed to know. He settled into the straight backed chair, and cracked his knuckles once he'd balanced the laptop on his knees. There was a minute of juggling the case, the laptop, and the power adaptor, but Nick eventually got himself settled in.

He waited for it to power up, remembering that Grissom had nearly cried when he realized what the verse was and what the disease it described could be. He had. After the hazmat check, he'd gone to the rest room and just sat and tried not to, but somewhere it got the better of him. It could have been all of them. Instead it was Greg, Greg who'd managed to shut himself in, keep them safe and sit there knowing he was breathing in a deadly disease while they stood and watched.

Warrick had said he wasn't sure if he could have done that. Nick wasn't too sure that he would've either.
Mail. Maybe some answers would be in from all his database inquiries.

He had to do something instead of thinking about the fact that Greg was in there vomiting so hard that he ruptured capillaries and worse. Even if he survived, and Nick hoped that it was a strong if, he was going to be weak for a long time. Sick and tired for a long time, getting better. But that was so much better than dead.

All they needed to know was that the antibiotics were kicking in. Once they did, he would recover. He kept saying that.

He checked his mail absently and started to pay attention.

"Finally," he muttered aloud. The computer trail to Judge Mason's various associated properties and investments. He was looking for somewhere that he might be using as a base. There was the old warehouse and the flat. That was out. Judge Mason was a busy boy. A medical laboratory and pharmacy. No prizes for guessing how he had gotten hold of the resources to cultivate Anthrax then. Three flats scattered around the city and usually rented out. A boat repair shop out on one of the lakes. He might have a boat, that was a possibility. If he did, he might be moving around, hence no leads. And a house on the outskirts also run through a lettings agency. The man had property, that was for sure, and investments. Any one of those places could be a base although he liked the idea of a boat. It might just solve his disappearing act. Certainly would mean Lecter would have a hard time sneaking up on him.

He decided to note down his ideas and email them to the lab. See what Grissom thought.

Grissom would be awake and reading his email, awake and answering things. He didn't seem to sleep at all, and Catherine had mentioned on the phone to Nick that he'd taken up chain-smoking on the roof. Nick kinda wished he knew how to smoke so he could go chain-smoke on the roof.

It was kinda weird thinking of Grissom smoking. He'd practically have a fit if one of them did it anywhere near a crime scene.

It was better than thinking about Greg and maybe it would help. Greg wanted Millander and Lecter caught as much as any of them did.

Greg had more reason to want them caught. Nick just had trouble sitting straight for too long. Greg was... dying. Almost dying. Teetering on that edge so dangerously that Nick had to keep concentrating to make his mind veer off less.

He typed the mail, detailing everything he had uncovered and his suspicions. And then he... just wanted to see how Greg was again. Wanted to know if he was going to make it. Wanted to be able to say, 'And by the way things are looking better...'

But when he took himself back there and looked into the ICU, it didn't look better at all. Greg was too still, and they were too busy putting in extra lines and needles with that worryingly fast urgent movement they had when things were going wrong.

He forgot about work and left the laptop to run down its battery as he stood and watched and hoped somehow by watching, things would change.

Jim was unaware that he was driving again.
It was a necessity, the way that Gil saw it, even though he hadn't technically been fully medically cleared for it. He’d been out in the field again and he hadn't been cleared for that, and being cleared wouldn’t do him a whole lot of good or not cleared a whole lot of bad if they were all dead. If he was dead.

And Ecklie would've been dead if Gil'd had to head to the scene they were investigating in the car with him.

It was proving bad enough when they reached the first empty apartment and Ecklie was obviously very disgruntled about being drafted into the nightshift as well as all of a sudden being on the front-line like his team had been. They had all been living off the reflected danger from the Anthrax contamination with a sort of vicarious thrill, but now he was plunged right in with them and he wasn't happy at all.

It was providing Gil with some minor amusement and a great deal of irritation.

"Why are we doing two apartments? Brown and Brass are only doing one and you got Sidle and Willows at a house," Ecklie said as he snapped on his gloves. He looked at Gil and frowned. "You're smoking."

That was why he was standing outside of his car, but if Conrad wanted to play things slow and surprised, Gil could go with it. "I'm smoking," he confirmed, taking a slow drag. Two more and he'd be finished with it; he'd put his gloves on, and feel his way through the case. But not yet. "It's helping me think."

"Grissom, you are the most rabid nonsmoker I know," Ecklie said with clear distaste. "I remember what you did to that trainee a few years back who smoked even on the edges of a scene. It's practically a legend and here you are..." He looked at the screwed up box visible on the dashboard. "... chain-smoking. I'm starting to wonder if you should be back at all."

Gil took another slow drag, and then dropped the cigarette to the ground, and put it out on the asphalt with the toe of his shoe. "Conrad, you'd be in a mental institution if you were in my shoes right now."

"You're the one saying it, and if I were in your shoes? I'd be as far away from here as possible," Conrad said looking around at the building they were about to enter. "You reckon they've cleared the building? I hope they've done it properly."

"Just be glad that we're looking for Millander and not Lecter." Gil paused to pick up his kit, and then took another slow minute to pull his gloves on the proper way. "He'd probably take the top of your skull off."

"A serial killer is a serial killer. They're both disturbed and dangerous," Ecklie replied dismissively. "I suppose we should be glad we finally got a lead on this. Dayshift has been covering a lot of extra work while this has been going on." He gestured to himself. "I'm here because you need help, so let's get on with this."

As if Conrad was doing him a huge favor. He didn't even need to be there except that Jim was paranoid about him setting out on his own. And there was a quiet dark edge to Gil's thoughts that suggested maybe he was all right with being attacked again if Conrad could get a little collateral damage.
It wasn't a very healthy thought, but it was there and Gil couldn't quite shake it. He couldn't quite shake a lot of things, but he was going to try. "After you."

They had never been comfortable around each other. Ecklie was too much the politician, too good at playing the game like Jack had been for Gil to ever warm to him. The fact that he cut corners sometimes and made assumptions that weren't directly supported by evidence in itself was enough to earn him collateral damage.

But the place as they walked up to it didn't feel like it would be the place they were looking for. He was staring at it from the outside. The view from the apartment they identified was narrowed and blinkered. Millander or Lecter wouldn't like that. Not at all.

Lecter wouldn't, but this wasn't Lecter's place. Not wide and open, no scenic views. And Millander wouldn't go for it, either. He liked vast spaces, driving, warehouses, and it didn't work. It didn't fit, and Gil knew before they even entered the doorway that it was a waste of time. "Just a once over, Conrad. He hasn't been here."

"What, so smoking has given you second sight?" Ecklie replied. "Maybe I should have checked what you were smoking."

It was almost familiar and comforting in its own way. He could rely on Ecklie to always be Ecklie no matter what had happened to him.

"It's too narrow, and the windows are too small. Strategically, it's not going to cut it for Millander. He prefers more natural light, and more space. Do you want to bet money on how much dust is going to be on the furniture?"

"And maybe he chose it because he's second guessing you," Conrad countered. "Or because it's convenient for downtown Vegas. Who knows how his head is working? I haven't got time for bets. I would've thought you'd be discouraging that in your people."

Ah yes, the famous Ecklie Sidestep and Snark.

"After Warrick, you mean. Come out and say it, Conrad." Gil stepped in first, even though he'd suggested that Conrad go in first, and wasn't at all surprised by the amount of dust clinging to the furniture. The place hadn't been used in at least a year.

"All right. After Warrick. You should've fired him," Conrad said and his expression twisted as he saw Gil had been right. "You're sticking your neck out for someone who will let you down. I'll start prints at the door and work in, see if there's anything."

Gil didn't think that there would be, but he started cautiously forwards, watching the ground before he walked, making sure there wasn't anything in or near his path to stir. The only prints Ecklie would find were the previous tenant's. If that.

Still, it was a process of elimination. Nicky had done good work, even if he had been at the hospital, because Judge Mason and Paul Millander hid their investments very carefully. A normal look uncovered only the normal sort of bank accounts, nothing to justify the ability for him to work infrequently, to run that warehouse, to do all the things he had managed to do so effortlessly. Revenue coming in from properties would be good, and they'd discovered one of the apartments had recently been bought out by the tenants as a bargain for cash and that meant fairly recently Paul Millander had gotten a sizable cash influx, which meant he could go anywhere and buy anything
with no trails leading to him.

The picture was coming together slowly, but this wasn't Millander's nest. He wondered if Nick had been right about there being a boat. Nothing was listed, but if he had just had a cash pay out on a property he could have bought one cash in hand.

Cash in hand meant untraceable, and there was an investment in that boat-repair firm, wasn't there? Gil peered around again, looking for anything useful, and tried to push down the itching urge to abandon the scene to go there instead.

"Gil? You working this scene or not?" Ecklie prompted even as he lightly dusted the door frame and switched. "Because it wasn't my idea to be here. We could easily head on back to the lab or apartment number two."

"Lift those prints and then let's leave. We're heading to the boating company he's invested in. This place isn't what we're looking for."

Conrad looked at him. "Sidle and Willows were meant to be doing that after the house, remember? What, you're having a premonition or something?"

No, but his phone was ringing in his pocket. A close second.

"It's not psychicness or whatever you're inferring -- it's thinking, Conrad. Just thinking," he snapped, reaching into his pocket to pull out his phone. "Grissom."

"Grissom, its Nick. Just been reading the papers and I saw a classified ad in there," Nick sounded worried "I'm not sure what it means. It says, 'A message from God,' and then it has 31:22, 33:23 and 33:24 and the 30:23...."

"31:22, 33:23, 33:24, and 30:23," Gil repeated back. He stepped past Ecklie, heading for his Tahoe and the Bible that he'd stuck under the passenger seat. "Okay, I've got it. Was there anything else?"

"I got worried when I saw the mention of the house. I can't get Catherine or Sara. I spoke to Jim and Warrick, and now you, but I'm not getting anything to them." Nick definitely sounded worried. "I was calling to say Greg's had a rough night and they've kicked me out while they try another dose of a different antibiotic. They wouldn't have their phones off, would they?"

"No, they wouldn't," Gil murmured, reaching into his pocket for his keys. "Call Jim back and tell him that we have an emergency. I'm heading to the boat repair company."

"The boat repair... okay I'll tell him," Nick replied sounding even more worried. "You want me to do anything else, Griss?"

"Stay at the hospital? Keep trying to call Catherine." He'd call Jack himself, Gil decided as he slid the key in the lock and popped open his door. He reached over to the passenger side seat, ignoring the pulling in his chest while he started to fish for the Bible. "I'm going to let you go now, Nick."

"Just be careful, okay?"

Nick hung up, and he'd just walked out on Ecklie who obviously thought he'd completely lost it and was probably telling the Sheriff that even as he flicked to Job.

31:22. He knew that one. The one he had predicted; "Then let mine arm fall from my shoulder blade,
and mine arm be broken from the bone." That was the threat and he felt a stirring of panic that it might be Catherine or Sara. The others were unexpected.

33:23 and 33: 24 -- "If there be a messenger with him, an interpreter, one among a thousand, to shew unto man his uprightness:

Then he is gracious unto him, and saith, Deliver him from going down to the pit: I have found a ransom."

He stopped a moment and reworded it in his head. "If you understand this message, bring yourself as a ransom to save the other from the pit."

Out of all the places if there was going to be a literal pit, it would be at the boat repair shop. Damn, he should have gone there first.

And the last? 30:23 "For I know that thou wilt bring me to death, and to the house appointed for all living." Millander was saying someone was going to die and this was the end of it. He wanted to bring himself to death.

Or Lecter. Gil couldn't be sure because self-preservation held no weight in the actions of serial killers -- because after all, if it had, they logically wouldn't have started down that path to begin with. Gil closed the book, left it on the passenger seat, and revved the engine while he thumbed through his missed calls list to pick out Jack's cell phone number.

Millander was going for the endgame scenario, he knew it. The advert was in the paper specifically so Lecter could find it, so he must have been expecting to make a move not long after the papers went out. And they'd obliged by sending people into the field, otherwise maybe he might have gone after them at the lab, or Nick or Greg at the hospital... or...

Jack's number was ringing and he was impatient to move.

"Crawford, FBI?"

"Jack, it's..." He had to stop for a moment, and finished lamely as he pulled out onto the road, "me. We've lost contact with CSI Willows and Sidle, and Stokes called. There's an ad in the newspaper that's a clear message to Lecter. I think Millander is at the property, the boat repair place."

"What the hell... ?" Jack was thrown, he could tell that. "It's happening now?"

He would get there before them, they were on the wrong side of Vegas, but Catherine and Sara were even closer. Jim was about the same distance away as he was. It might be over before they got there. Or it might be a hostage situation. Either way, there needed to be someone to pick up the pieces.

"It's happening now, Jack. Moment of opportunity. You want to put on a show of force, now would be the time to use it." And Jack could. Jack had been dragging agents around like hunting dogs for a couple of weeks now.

"You sure about the boat repair place? Scratch that. Okay, look wait for us okay? Wait for us to get there, don't go in alone!" Jack urged him.

"He's taken a hostage, Jack, and he's open to a showdown to the death with Lecter. If that hostage is one of my CSIs..." Gil couldn't think past that. He could just drive and peer at his GPS and keep driving.
"And if it's a trap and you stumble in there and give him a hostage? Come on, the option is way open, Will, think about this," Jack replied. "Wait, okay. We'll be there as quick as we can."

The question was going to be whether it was quick enough.

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After the last emergency message from Gil, Jim had barely waited to close his phone before moving. He knew Nick had been landed with the call because Gil hadn't dared to call him himself. Damn right -- he would have nailed him to the ground because he knew what Gil was going to do. He wouldn't be thinking straight. He was just going to head right on over into whatever hell type trap had been set up without even blinking.

Jim hadn't even stopped to swear. He needed to know if the hostage taking was real so he sent Warrick to the house address.

Warrick would have gotten to the house, and he wasn't too far from the Boat repair shop now. He just needed to know ... he needed to know if Catherine and Sara were still alive and what had happened to their protectors. If they were alive or dead or what, because he didn't want there to be dead cops anymore than he wanted there to be dead CSIs, and Jim had to wonder how much longer Vegas was going to be bloodless. Relatively bloodless, since they still hadn't found where the 'back bacon' had come from.

He couldn't get there fast enough for his taste because Jim knew, just fucking knew that Gil was going to jump in with both feet. He'd apparently jumped through a glass window at some point with the Dollarhyde case. Gil plus Jack Crawford equaled a disconnect in Gil's survival instinct.

A threat to his team did the same. He had no doubt that Gil would have swapped places with Greg, or Nick, or Warrick and himself in an instant, like he would for Gil. Hopefully he'd have done it with a bit more self-preservation going on than Gil was demonstrating.

He reached for his glove compartment for his second gun. He'd need that. He'd stuff it in his sock if he didn't think Lecter would thing to look there. Back waistband was a lot more comfortable, he'd put it in when he got there.

He was only about two miles away from his destination when the phone went again, making him swear.

It took him a second to fish it out, and answer curtly with his name. "Brass."

"It's Warrick. Hey, I'm here at the house. We've got signs of a struggle. Sara's car is still here, Catherine's isn't, two sets of tire treads that peeled away and laid rubber."

"You think ..." Two sets of tire treads. "You think Catherine went after them?"

What was wrong with these CSIs? After this was over, he was getting them all in a room and teaching them that the detectives did one thing, they did the other. When it was safe.

He was going to blame that shit on Gil, because he'd never encouraged that kind of insanity. How hard was it to call the cops? Just once? "Maybe. I think the officers with them were lured off. I think they're coming back now."

"What part of, 'Whatever you do don't leave them alone,' didn't they understand?" Jim asked,
managing not to swear too obviously. "Look, I'm nearly there. They'll be in a hurry now, word is out, so I'll try and stall them. If that's some of the cops, send them on over. Nick says the Feds are on their way but I think I'm going to be the first there... after maybe Catherine and Gil."

He could hear Warrick make a disbelieving noise, and then sigh. "Right, I'll do that. Good luck."

"Yeah, thanks." He'd need it. Couple of minutes away and he just hoped he was in time to stop Gil doing anything stupid. Or Catherine, because when it came to Gil, right now she was highly strung and under a lot of stress. Gil might not have seen it, but he had. She'd been pushing and pushing so hard, trying to make up for what she saw as her mistake that she was liable to risk anything.

He pulled up outside the address, coasting a little way on down the road before getting out, stuffing his extra gun in his waistband at the center of his back and then drawing his other gun and heading off as quietly as possible to the building.

It was a pretty seedy looking place, a shop front with a large working area that a glance showed him backed out to a jetty on the lake. There was a boat there he could just about see and he mentally awarded a point to Nicky. Good guess. Floating home base.

The only thing that looked out of place was the multitude of cars pulled up near the place. There was Gil's car, and there was a pretty unremarkable gray rental car, and there was a beaten up old Ford LT. No sign of Catherine's car yet.

That was either good news in that she hadn't arrived, or bad news in that they had been wrong and she was the hostage, or she and Sara were both hostages. Catherine's car could have been used as a decoy....

He grimaced a little and headed toward to doorway that was a little ajar. Odds were, no one was watching it if there were so many people inside. Carefully he slipped inside listening to try and focus on where any of them were. He could hear the echoing sounds of Gil's voice saying... saying something.

Gil's voice sounded so calm, almost flat, but Jim heard it when it started to spike in tone.

"Put the knife down. Put the, put the knife down. God d--fuck! Hannibal. Hannibal, I don't remember God killing Job."

"In the end, God kills everyone, Will. Isn't that your point, Paul?"

It was the first time he'd heard Lecter's voice and it was at once smoothly charming and creepy as fuck.

"You kill him and you prove yourself unrighteous..."

That was Millander's voice and he sounded angry.

"Perhaps I am... a jealous god," Lecter almost purred and he was close enough, close enough to see them all. Gil, Lecter had Gil in a mockery of an intimate hold, knife blade flickering at his stomach level.

Millander was opposite them, pointing a gun at them both.

"I c-could shoot him now and he would be mine Lecter. I could shoot you..."
"But you don't want to, do you, P-Paul?", Lecter mocked him with a mimicry of the slight stutter. "No doubt you were aware that your stutter is a manifestation of internal conflict. Handy for me of course."

Jim just wanted to shoot the bastard. Only if he shot Lecter -- difficult from this distance, Millander could still kill Gil. If he shot Millander, Lecter could still kill him.

"Goddamn it, Gil," he murmured to himself, trying to get a little closer.

Gil had his hands out, off to the side in some pose of surrender. He looked like he was breathing a little hard, but Lecter was pressed close behind him, one arm looped from his shoulder across his chest. He wasn't exceedingly tall, but dead even with Gil, and that made getting a shot in hard.

"There are always sacrifices." Millander was aiming, lifting the gun. It was a high caliber, the kind that blew through walls and killed kids in drivebys. If he fired it as a head shot, there was no question that he could kill them both.

Oh fuck, no... He had to make a decision because he recognized that look in Millander's eyes. Death or glory look, famous last stand look. He broke cover yelling, "Drop your weapons!" It wasn't much but they both glanced for a moment, their attention on him in that moment of inattention, a sudden flurry of red hair from the other side of the tableau and there was Catherine diving at and wrestling with Lecter's knife arm.

Immediately, his options narrowed and he turned and fired at Millander twice before he heard gun fire from behind him -- Jesus, from behind him -- and he had to throw himself to the ground.

"Jesus Christ!" That's all they needed, someone else at the party. Who the hell was that?

There was more shooting, and a bullet pinged the wall near his head with a ricochet snap before sanity kicked in and Jim started to move. It wasn't safe ground if someone was behind you, and Jim damn well knew how to crawl fast. Still. Elbows and toes, and his chest was still killing him from playing at fireman with Warrick and the Masons, but it was insane when it was safer to be closer to the serial killers than away from them.

Gil was moving from what Jim could see, standing up despite the gun shots before he got close to the edge of the pit. "Grab my hand!"

What the hell was he doing? "Gil, get down!" he bellowed betraying his own location with the warning and having to dive off behind a partially built keel. Whoever it was behind him they were a good shot. Hopefully they would concentrate on him not on Gil. He fired randomly behind him, trying to see a shape or movement in the shadows and keep tabs on what was going on next to that pit.

Oh no, Millander was propping himself up and lifting his gun. Gil had his back to him only...

The shots rang out at the still struggling pair of Catherine and Lecter and Catherine went down and so did Lecter.

"Cath?!" He moved again staying low even as he heard another woman's voice screaming "No!"

Not Catherine. Not Sara.

So it was a woman trying to take him out. Take them all out, but he could hear her running towards
them, could see a slim, muscled figure shove Catherine back from the mess, as Lecter rolled onto his
back, groaning.

Agent Starling, the long-lost brainwashed protégé of Jack, Jim could guess. She had to have been
brainwashed by the bastard to act like that, except Gil went still, too, where he was crouching near
the pit, twisted to watch. Could've moved to attack and didn't.

He could see a hand scrabbling at the edge of the pit and figured they'd finally worked out where
Sara was and he tried to get a clear shot at Agent Starling, abandoning cover to do it, but she saw
what he was doing and made a lunge towards Gil that terrified him. He started running forwards,
heedless of anything. They couldn't take Gil hostage, not again.

Even as he ran closer, he saw Sara's hand fumbling upwards, twisting Gil's gun still in the holster
and firing it at the woman about to pounce on Gil from behind. She went down in silence and Jim
stood there with his gun trained on the group.

Silence.

Silence lasted until Gil jolted forwards a little, pulling his gun out of his holster like he didn't even
care that Sara had just fired it for him. He knelt beside Lecter, and put a knee on his chest, the muzzle
of Gil's gun pressing against the hollow of his throat. He was still breathing, and Gil leaned a little to
check Starling's pulse.

And then the silence was only broken by the sounds of sirens.

"And now the Cavalry arrives," Jim said dryly moving forward to help Sara out of the pit, being
careful of her dislocated shoulder. How she'd fired with that arm he didn't know. He warily moved
past Gil to get to Catherine.

"She alive, Gil?" he asked of Starling, praying that Catherine was too. She'd been in the line of fire
too long.

"Winged her. She should be all right." He was resting half of his body weight on Lecter's chest, and
that gun wasn't moving. Gil's finger barely was touching the trigger. "Cath...?"

"Looking," Jim replied and turned her over gently dreading what he might see. Right shoulder, blood
everywhere and... Blood at her side. Knife. He looked at it more closely and grimaced. Slice rather
than a stab then and not so deep. He checked her pulse and it was still strong. "She's alive. Gunshot
and knife wound." He put some pressure on the shoulder wound and hoped Crawford and his merry
men would turn up.

"Get her and Sara out of here first. I can't move." Technically he was right. Someone needed to
guard the psychopaths, and Jim didn't think there were any dead bodies in that room yet. Lecter was
more dangerous than Millander, at least in Gil's head. And maybe in reality. Jim just couldn't be sure.

"Sara, you can walk right?" Jim asked.

"Yeah, it was my shoulder he dislocated, not my leg," Sara said a little faintly.

"You mind coming over here and putting pressure on Catherine's shoulder while I check our second
serial killer doesn't have his gun handy?" he asked with deceptive calm. "Just while the FBI works
out the best way to do a dramatic entrance."
"Sure." Sara's arm looked twisted and definitely dislocated, and she was abnormally pale and drawn but she was still moving while Grissom kept Bonnie and Clyde in place. "Are we going to have to put our hands up? Because I don't think I can."

"Goddammit, Jack..." Gil muttered that, and then looked up and over to the door before he bellowed, a sharp bellow that Jim was pretty sure he hadn't heart Gil ever use before. "CRAWFORD! We've got them down! Do your goddamned job and get IN HERE!"

Jim moved over to Millander. He nodded to himself. Straight shot to the chest. He congratulated himself and had to wonder how exactly it was those eyes were open and moving, watching him as he patted him down for guns and took it off of him. "Looks like both of you lost your game, Millander," he murmured.

"... is not over..." Millander had a curious bubbling quality to his voice now. Punctured lungs had a tendency to do that.

Jim looked at him. "Yeah, yeah it is. And you know something, I don't think you're going to make it to trial are you? We both know that. And you deserve it."

"... sacrifices for justice..." He twisted his head to look at Gil still pinning Lecter down. "... necessary. Sorry about Gil, though."

Jim nearly saw red. Sorry? SORRY? What sort of thing was that to say? He'd raped and mutilated Gil. Sorry was nothing, just a word.

"Just lie there and die, will you? Actions speak louder than words."

He wasn't sure if the man heard him, and he damn well wasn't going to pass on his 'deathbed' message. Sorry. Fuck, Gil hadn't even had time to deal with everything, Millander had probably killed Sanders, hit Nick with a truck -- and he was sorry?

All for justice. Maybe killing Lecter or getting him recaptured was justice for Millander. At any cost, apparently.

Jim could hear boots on the ground, footsteps coming towards them, and Jack at their lead. "Clear?"

"It's clear, Jack. They're down. Can you get them out of here before my CSI bleeds to death and Starling dies?" Nothing about acting before Millander or Lecter bled to death. No, he wouldn't be sorry if there was a bleed out there.

"Jesus, Will," Jack commented waving agents in who efficiently fanned out to secure Lecter and Millander, and start the process of getting Catherine, Agent Starling and Sara to medical care. "We've got it under control."

Jim also decided the next time Jack called Gil Will, he was going to punch him. He considered that he might just be having a little bit of a hostility backwash as he moved over to help Gil up. Under control... yeah, right.

"I told you to wait until I got here," Jack was saying to Gil. "You should've waited."

Gil stood up, knelt back and then leaned into Jim while he got his bearings. "Why? We got it done."

"But you could've... I mean... You could've been shot, killed." Jack stumbled through it, obviously not expecting the retort.
"But he didn't," Jim said and then looked at Gil. "You weren't, were you? I can't see any leaking holes..."

"That's a miracle, isn't it?" Gil grinned a little sharply for a moment. but his eyes were on the men who were quickly binding Lecter before they even tried to take him away.

"Sign of the apocalypse, I think," Jim replied. "Relax, Gil, they've got him. And Millander will be lucky to make it to the ambulance let alone to hospital." He rested his hand on Gil's shoulder almost dazed with amazement. They had made it through to the end of the ordeal and at this point in time they were all alive. Score one for the good guys.

"Sir? He keeps asking for... Grissom," one of the agents who was with Millander said a little hesitantly. "I think... he's... uh..."

Dying. It was obvious. Jack looked at Gil and Jim shook his head. "Don't even think about asking him to do anything, Jack."

Jack shrugged. "Up to him if he's always going to wonder what he wanted." And Jack apparently knew Gil, because he pulled away from Jim, stepping past the agents hogtying Lecter, and past the agents who were with Millander. The best Jim could do was shadow him.

Gil knelt next to Millander even as the Agents were starting to lead Lecter away and Jim knelt with him, feeling a little like they were praying over a corpse. A soon to be corpse anyway. Millander was deathly white, and flecks of crimson bubbled at the corner of his mouth.

"... Grissom...." Millander's voice was a gurgling murmur now but his eyes were clear and looking at Gil, focused on him. "... you understand? Necessary to stop him. Last act of... Justice..."

"I understand. We've got him, got them both." Not that Jim was sure he understood, but Gil reached down to squeeze the man's hand. "It's over now. For both of you."

"... not quite over..." Paul half smiled and Jim just couldn't understand how Gil could hold the hand of the man that had tried to kill him and people he'd cared for. The man who had raped and nearly killed him. How could he do that?

"... another time, Gil, maybe... could've... I wish...." He coughed a little and fresh blood was there and he seemed to be listening, waiting. "You... know what he will do..."

The only way Jim could describe the look on Gil's face was a prairie dog sitting up in sudden alarm as realization dawned. "Jack, Jack! He's going to make a run for it!"

And then they heard the noise, someone screaming out in pain, one of Jack's agents.

Jim was about to jump up and run out -- damned if Lecter was going to get away again when he saw Millander's smile of blood and foam. He was reaching for Gil's hand even as the throbbing engine of a boat roared into life and started pulling away from the jetty outside. He gripped onto his hand with a strength born of fanaticism and said,

"Final move..." and squeezed his hands tight around Grissom's own.

Jim distinctly heard a click and then everyone heard and felt the massive explosion as the boat, obviously wired with explosives was destroyed in a vast fire ball.

"... Justice is Served..." Millander whispered with the last of his voice and breath and finally, finally closed his eyes.
They could feel the heat even as they stayed there, and Gil sat there in still shock, pulling his hand back. There was an electronic device, and Gil was staring at it.

Jim looked down as well. Detonator, small, compact, limited range but with enough to blow the boat. "Son of a bitch," Jim murmured under his breath. Millander had figured Lecter would escape all along. Planned for it even, by planting his boat there as a possible escape vehicle and booby trapping it. "He made the boat a final trap."

"Brilliant." Gil turned it over in his hand, and then looked down. "Jim? Let's get out of here. We're going to have to make statements and Catherine..."

"She had a strong pulse, Gil," Jim said. Stronger than Gil's had been when he and Catherine had found him. He hoped to God that Catherine made it. It was a damn stupid thing to do, but it had undoubtedly saved Gil's life, Sara's life. He could never have shot them both in time.

He hoped Sanders made it, too.

Gil was right, time to get out of here. "Yeah. We'll go to the hospital after, right?"

"Yeah." Gil offered the detonator over to Jack, after he reached into his pocket and wrapped it in a latex glove. "Get this into evidence. I don't envy your forensics people trying to sort this out."

"We'll take it," Jack said looking a bit stunned. "I think your people are a bit light on the ground right now."

Jim looked at him. It was the first time he had acknowledged that Gil had 'people', had a life that had gone on after switching names.

"C'mon, Gil, let's get some air."

"Sure." Quiet compliance and Gil started to walk off before Jim could catch up with him. He looked a little dazed, and the rising sunlight didn't seem to help him.

Jim was feeling pretty dazed himself, but he guessed it wasn't anything compared to how Gil might be feeling. Even the tension of the past couple of weeks unwinding suddenly made him lightheaded.

With Gil, it was the past couple of decades.

"You feeling okay?" he asked eventually slipping an arm around him.

"I'm not going to believe it until someone puts his teeth on my desk." Gil allowed the physical contact, and slid his own arm behind Jim's back.

"Well he was shot, and then hopefully blown up," Jim replied. "I'm thinking bouncing back from that might be a bit difficult." Impossible more like. He shook his head. "He could be gone, Gil. Really gone."

He didn't get an answer, and it made sense. Gil had been living with that for decades, the shadow of that threat and sometimes that threat right in his face. It would be hard to shake that after so long, and it had just happened. Maybe he was in shock.

"Millander's dead." At least he was pretty sure from the way they hadn't rushed to get him to medical aid. It was a miracle he'd lasted as long as he did. He'd have to deal with IA over that. "I.... I'm not sure what he was doing, but he planned everything to take Lecter out. I'm not sure if he succeeded or failed by dying too."
"He succeeded. He expected to die in it," Gil murmured. He was veering over towards his own SUV instead of Jim's car. "He was fatalistic before he left me to die."

"He seemed please you didn't, though," Jim said. "Although not half as pleased as I was. You know, it's not everyone who could hold the hand of the person who tried to kill them."

"His... motivations were in the right place. I don't know." Gil reached with his free hand into his pocket, fishing for his key. "He's dead now. It's over."

Jim was still concerned about how he was acting. It seemed a little disconnected. "So we get to go home after all the hoopla. Your place or mine?"

Or perhaps he wanted to be alone, or perhaps he didn't need him there any more. Or perhaps they'd end up staying at the hospital. Jim decided he was badly in need of a drink.

"Your place. Or I'll end up rummaging through old photographs until I fall asleep." Gil pulled his keys out, and handed them over to Jim. "I drove myself. If I'd been stuck relying on Ecklie I would have had to kill him."

"You... you were driving? Okay, okay, I get the point. Ecklie. Another murder," Jim smiled just pleased that this was over. "Have I said yet that I'm glad to see you alive? I know I'm thinking it, but I'm not sure if I've said it."

"I'm glad you're alive, too." He turned towards Jim again, arm still around him. "She could've shot you." Never mind the obvious that Gil had had a knife to his stomach.

"Yeah, but you know, I was the one hiding and firing from cover," he pointed out. True to start with. "I wasn't the one standing in the thick of it. How did you get to be like that anyway?"

"When I came in, Millander was threatening to shoot Sara. I offered myself... as a more interesting hostage in exchange for her safety."

"And that seemed like a good idea at the time?" Jim asked in a calm tone of voice. Of course it did. It always seemed like that to Gil. Why did he even ask?

"He was aiming at her head, Jim. It seemed like a great idea at the time." Gil's expression was tired, strained, and his mind was probably in ten billion places. And his eyes were tracking someone coming up behind them.

"Just this once I'll give you that," Jim murmured looking behind him to see who it was. "Jack. You know, I'm glad you finally got things together. Finished with the scene?"

"Yeah, well. Gave my guys the detonator. Willows is going to the nearest hospital, and Agent Starling is headed that way, too. Under heavy guard." He had the same strained, tired detachment that Gil had, like the comedown wasn't worth it for either of them. "We're gonna get a dive team out here to look for Lecter's body, and fire trucks are on their way to put it out before the boathouse catches fire. Hell of a mess, Will."

"Yeah. But you have Starling back."

A brainwashed agent he'd been willing to risk Gil's sanity over. Jim found himself curling his lip a little in an almost snarl. "Well great. And you know? I think it's time to stop this Will, Gil business. One or the other."
He didn't know why but it seemed important that they stopped tugging him in two directions. He turned to Gil. "Which do you prefer?"

For one too-long moment, Gil looked a little confused. Then his fingers shifted against Jim, spread out and finally seemed to relax. "Gil."

"I know. It's just... habit." Jack frowned a little at them both. "So, uh. We're going to map out the scene, and I'll send a couple of agents to pick you two up tomorrow for processing on your statements."

"We're going back to my place and then heading over to the hospital to see how Sara, Catherine, Greg and Nick are," Jim replied even as he turned Gil back towards the cars. "You think you can get someone to drive Grissom's car to the lab? I think I better drive us back."

"We're down just to us and Warrick still out of the hospital, aren't we?" Gil asked, sounding a little more together as he tossed his keys at Jack.

"Yeah. Keep him away from the cigarettes, okay? Molly might just make an effort to kill me if she found out I got him going again." Jack caught them smoothly, and he was actually addressing Jim in a semi-polite way.

"I'm hoping he can kick it as quick as he started up again," Jim replied starting to steer him away towards the car. "And that there's no need to do it any more." He considered he could invest in a neon sign saying 'Hands off!' for Gil, but it might just be too subtle for the FBI.

Nothing short of a shotgun might work. "Yeah. Go home and rest, okay? I'll go talk to the sheriff about what happened to the rest of your shift." Then Jack turned away, sauntered, pulling his cell phone out of his pocket.

"For once, I'm willing to let him get on with it," Jim said. "Let's go home, Gil, grab some coffee, maybe..." He shrugged. "Maybe rest for a couple of hours then we can go over and see how Cath is doing. She's tough. I'm surprised the bullets didn't bounce."

"She tackled him. I wish I'd had a better view," Gil murmured, walking with Jim towards his car. "I don't think I need any coffee. A shower, maybe. A quick nap."

"We'll do that," Jim promised. "Anything you want." He meant it. Suddenly the pressure was lifted. They had to avoid the press but Gil had his own inimitable style when it came to the media. He was just glad to have him alive, and in one piece.

"Let's go home."

He hadn't been able to sleep.

Gil wasn't sure if Jim had noticed or not, but it had been relaxing just to lie there, holding Jim while he slept, trying to put those thoughts out of his mind. Millander was dead. Lecter was possibly dead, and it was over. But nothing much changed, did it? He was still off kilter and it wasn't as if what had happened would turn back the hands of time. It wasn't going to. Catherine was still in the hospital, and Sara had been hurt and Greg was still possibly dying.

He felt strange. Almost dazed, just as he had since the fire-fight at the boat shop. He hadn't cared then if he had been hit, he just wanted to be able to save someone. He'd missed what Catherine had
done and wished he'd seen it. Throwing herself in to fight Lecter, that was definitely Catherine all the way through and he just had this growing fear things couldn't possibly work out for them all.

Jim seemed to be telling him otherwise but it was hard to listen at the moment. Until he knew they were going to be okay, or... He didn't know. He stood while Jim quizzed them at the desk about Catherine.

There had to be some news, but it was a matter of whether they'd tell them or not, badges or otherwise. Eddie was still her medical contact, because Lindsey needed to know what was going on with her. Maybe they were there already.

Gil wasn't sure.

He was just sitting wondering if his brain was flying apart. He couldn't do that now. He concentrated on the feel of having Jim there, in his arms, solid and warm as only he could be. He had pushed Jim to sex and that had been good, but they hadn't done anything more since then except sleep.

And he'd felt sorry for Millander because he had understood him in far too many ways.

It had been easy to understand him, and he knew Jim didn't get it. But there was a link between perpetrators and victims, and as long as both were alive, it was hard to cut those ties of power. Gil knew that well, and understood what Millander had been trying to do. He was bait, and then it was all about luring Lecter in.

It was hard because he'd seen in his own way that Millander had been brilliant. Brilliant to go head to head with Lecter, to study him and understand both of them and use that. It was a waste.

Jim was heading back over. "She's been out of surgery for a couple of hours. Eddie's in there right now. You want to wait? You're down as an emergency contact, so they'll let you in but not me."

"We could wait," Gil offered, willing to play conciliatory. "Or we could see how Greg is. Or how Sara is. I might as well try to see how my team is."

"Up to you, Gil. Probably not the best idea to see Eddie and get into that mess," Jim acknowledged. "Sara is on a ward, and Sanders is in the ICU. Take your pick."

"Greg first." Nick would be haunting the ward, and maybe they could see Catherine after that. Sara... Sara was for last. Gil didn't know what to do with her, didn't know what to say, and didn't know what she was going to do.

Jim just nodded and he reached to help him up. "It's along here. I know this because I was spending a lot of time in there not that long ago," he quipped lightly glancing at Gil as they walked. "Sometimes I wonder if you realize how short a time ago it actually was."

"I know how short a time it was. Trust me, Jim. The eye he carved into my chest reminds me that on a regular basis, because the muscles hurt. I just." He paused and let Jim help him up, and straightened his clothes a little once he was standing. "Had to function. That's all that mattered."

"Yeah well, I'm hoping you'll give yourself a break soon. I saved vacation time for that," Jim replied as they went through a maze of corridors and into an elevator. "You've got to let yourself go at some point. I'm no shrink but... it comes out in other ways if you don't. I was pretty nasty with it for a while."

Gil leaned back against the elevator wall, looking down at his shoes for a moment. "I don't know how to let go, Jim. You'd think I could, but..." But he was already busy trying to find a fine
balancing point between Gil and Will, trying to find a way to be himself again.

"Personally, I got really drunk," Jim said pragmatically. "We can try that at some point if you want." The doors open and they were heading into the ICU. "As long as there aren't people trying to make your head a playground for whatever mind games are going on."

"It's felt a little like that," Gil agreed quietly, almost smiling. "It didn't help that I was playing my own games just to keep up with them."

"No need for games any more," Jim promised as they rounded the corner and found Nick sitting out in a waiting area. He looked tired and anxious himself, still with lines of pain in his expression. "Well, there's one of your team."

"Nick?" Gil picked up his pace just a little, still walking beside Jim. Nick was at least recovering well. Gil waited for his barely CSI3 to respond.

"Grissom!" Nick looked incredibly relieved to see him. "I've been trying to find out what was going on but Warrick didn't know all the details and I couldn't get through to everyone. You okay?"

"I'm okay, Jim's okay. Catherine just came out of surgery for the bullet she took, and we're going to go see how Sara is after this. Millander did something to her shoulder. But it's over. Millander is dead and the FBI is trying to fish Lecter's remains out of the lake." So anxious, and Gil decided to trade information for information. "How's Greg doing?"

"Greg's been really rough," Nick said looking at him as if he could change that somehow. "They're in taking some more samples at the moment. Poor guy has had more blood taken out of him than you would believe possible."

Gil could tell Nick was more than just concerned. Nick couldn't hide his emotions if his life depended on it.

They were all there, right on his face, and Gil could only watch them flicker a little, obvious to him and probably anyone else who wanted to see. "Have they been able to make any headway?"

Nick shook his head. "Last night... he nearly...." He stopped talking for a moment and had to clear a tightened throat. "They were trying him on another dose of a different kind of antibiotics. That's what they're checking for now."

Nick looked like he was falling apart, and Gil was poor at giving comfort. He reached forwards to grip Nick's shoulder tightly, moving closer. Will was more comfortable with physicality, and... And he really needed to stop encouraging the divide in his own head. "He's strong, Nick. And they're doing their best for him."

"Mr. Stokes?" A doctor had approached them while they had been talking. "We've finished in there." He gave a slight smile. "It looks like the antibiotics are starting to take hold. There are some significant jumps in his blood results and he's... regained consciousness."

Nick just stared at the man as if he had been speaking a foreign language.

Gil let his hand fall to the side, and contented himself with giving Nick an encouraging smile. "See? I told you he was strong."

"That's good news, right?" Jim said just making the point. "He's going to make it?"

"Lets just say the odds are significantly better now than they were even a few hours ago and getting
better all the time," the doctor replied. "He's going to be very weak for a bit and need a fair amount of recovery time, but the worst of this will be over in a week or so."

"He's really going to be okay?" Nick obviously couldn't believe it.

It wasn't a definite yes, but it was good enough for Gil to run with it and nod for Nick. "Seems like it, Nick. When they let you in to see him, pass on the good news."

Nick nodded, smiling suddenly before becoming serious again. "Catherine and Sara? Have you seen them yet? Can they have visitors?"

"We were just going to see them. Catherine and have visitors but Eddie was with her a few minutes ago, so... We were headed that way. Sara should be all right, too. She's in a room, not ICU." Gil was fairly sure he'd mentioned something like that before, but Nick was distracted. Nick had other things on his mind, and he understood that.

"Oh... Oh right." Nick looked over his shoulder. "You mind if I go back in? If he's awake. He'll be alone..."

Jim cleared his throat a little and glanced at Gil.

"Like I said, pass on the good news to him. It's over. I'm sure he'll appreciate it more when he's better, but it might help a little." If Gil hadn't already made a guess at it, Jim's throat-clearing would've answered the question for him. If there even had have been a question about what that look in Nick's eyes was. "Go on."

Nick smiled at him and headed off after the doctor, hurrying to keep up.

"Young love, huh?" Jim said twitching a smile as he glanced at Gil. "Hospitals have a lot to answer for. Young love and 'we're not old, we're in our prime' love."

"We are in our prime. We even managed not to get shot," Gil murmured while he turned to catch that twitching smile in the edge of his vision. "Let's go see if we can see Catherine now."

"I'd just like to say that I managed not to really get hurt at all and I am a front line cop." Jim said. "You know, I could pretend to be Catherine's uh... let's not go with father, shall we? Older brother."

"But I thought she was supposed to be my ex-wife." Gil paused, before they started to walk again. "Maybe that was why she divorced me."

"Shocking. You had a gay affair with her older brother?" Jim teased a little. "The one who got all the looks in the family?"

Gil knew he was trying to distract him. Jim was good at that., and he appreciated it more than Jim could guess. It got a laugh out of Gil, and he jostled Jim when they started to walk. "Better than having a gay affair with her father."

"Think of Jerry Springer opportunities," Jim countered. "Could make a fortune on talk shows." He was leading them back the way they came.

Since he seemed to know where he was going, Gil followed Jim. He didn't have to think, and he knew why Jim knew the way around the place. In less than the time it took most people, normal people given a good opportunity, to get over an incident like that, it had happened. And Jim had been there. And Gil was strolling around like nothing had happened because even after all of those years, Will didn't know how to let go and Gil didn't, either.
Didn't know how to do anything but drag himself together and carry on. Maybe Jim was wrong about him falling apart. "We could probably do that right now, Jim. Say the word, and the reporters I told off in the parking lot will fall on you like a pack of wolves."

"Threats, huh? Do that again and no more snuggling into my back when I'm sleeping." Jim paused. "You'll have to do it to my front. And you just made me use the word snuggling in public. I think I better hand in my badge."

Gil made a mock movement to take Jim's badge off of his jacket, but didn't actually touch it. "We'll have to find out what mature adults call it," Gil deadpanned. "We'll have to ask a mature adult first, of course."

"Well thank god we're going to see Catherine then," Jim said smiling at him again. "Mothers tend to know best. Even ex-wife younger sisters who think they're Wonder Woman or something."

He paused and Gil knew with a blinding flash of clarity that he was imagining Catherine in a Wonder Woman outfit. It was kind of hard not to. Even he was imagining it as Jim went quiet, and it was hard to keep talking, hard not to wonder along if Catherine ever went anywhere dressed as Wonder Woman for Halloween.

Hopefully, Eddie had gone home or gone for a cup of coffee because it was too late to turn around now.

"They may stop me," Jim muttered. "But we can try and get away with it. Say you're here to see her and I'm your partner. It might work." They presented themselves at the desk.

"If they stop you, I'll make it short," Gil promised just before the nurse turned around. "Hi, I'm here to see Catherine Willows -- my name is Gil Grissom, and this is my partner. We're both here to see her."

"Gil Grissom... I have down. Your partner?" The nurse looked up. "Oh yes! I remember Jim." She smiled. "You left us those chocolates when your partner..." She glanced back at Gil. "I'm sure it will be fine. What with you not being long out of hospital yourself. She's in room six."

"Thank you." Gil gave her a wide smile, and turned to head down the hallway, knowing Jim would be right at his side. Well, it worked, and it wasn't even that much of a lie. He and Jim were still muddling through things, but if they worked out that was what they both wanted, then Gil would be happy with it. And Jim didn't seem to think he'd screw it up anytime soon.

Jim seemed amazingly laid back about everything apart from wanting to shoot or hit people, which Gil could understand. He very rarely did. Well okay, Millander he had, he could be allowed that one.

They reached room six and Gil hesitated a moment. He wasn't sure what to say or do at the moment. He was awkward with normal things, let alone dealing with the niceties of thanking someone for maybe saving his life. He'd managed it with Nick so Catherine should be easier.

Should being the operative word and Gil decided to knock on the door before he actually opened it. Just in case Eddie was still in there, and mostly so he could have a little extra time to think. If she hadn't jumped Lecter, he wouldn't have been able to get away. Gil wasn't going to think too hard on the implication that Lecter had moved the knife when they'd gone over, or else Gil would've found himself impaled.

There was no male voice there and he heard something that sounded like 'Come in'. Jim seemed to think it was okay as he pushed the door open.
Gil wasn't sure how she managed it but Catherine seemed to look elegant even when lying in a hospital bed. She looked a little pale and obviously felt a little uncomfortable but she smiled when she saw him. "Hey, Gil."

"The doctors told us you were doing well enough that we could come see you." Gil started into the room, and let Jim close the door behind them. "Looks like we just missed Eddie."

"Wish I had," Catherine replied dryly. "At first I thought he was being nice, and you know, it's good to wake up and find him there. By the end of it he was trying to hit me up for money. I had to fake unconsciousness. Story of our married life in a nutshell." She had a slightly languid drawl to her voice. Probably drug induced.

It made Gil smile a little. People tended to talk more when they were drugged, and agree to things they otherwise might not. It figured that Eddie would try to turn that to his advantage. "At least he didn't get away with your checkbook. We just got good news about Greg. They think the new antibiotics are working."

"Hey, that's great!" Catherine mustered enthusiasm. "Looks like Nicky gets to have the closet door hit his ass on the way out then."

Jim stifled a snort next to him. "Don't ever change, Cath."

Gil's mouth curled into a faint smile as he moved closer, pulled out the one chair and then looked around for another so Jim could sit. "I don't think it was that. Crisis can change your priorities. And as long as they get their work done, and they're both alive, I don't care."

"Good because it would be hard to make a deal over it when you and Jim are heading into coupledom," Catherine replied looking directly at Brass.

"Hey, that just sort of happened," Jim replied. "Besides, Gil and I are in our prime. We worked it out."

"Sure you did." Catherine smiled a little. "Sara's okay, right? I missed the last part of what happened and Eddie wasn't interested in finding out for me."

"Sara's upstairs in a room and we were going to see her after we visited our intensive care patients," Gil said in a reasoned tone. "She was conscious when she got into the ambulance, though."

"Good." She seemed relieved. "He grabbed her at the house, I couldn't get a shot, not a clean shot and..." She stopped for a moment. "... and he dislocated her arm to get me to drop my gun. I would have taken the shot, Gil, if I'd had it, but he was going to kill her there and then, he said I would do as well instead of her and he picked up the gun and hit me with it. I must have been out five, ten minutes before I came round and went after them. He'd taken our phones and I knew where he was going..."

It was almost as if she was trying to explain so he wouldn't criticize her for what she did.

"Catherine. You did good, and you saved my life by getting there when you did. Everything worked out." He'd barely sat down before he started to say that

Catherine tilted her head a little. "That's it? No lectures on taking risks and what did I think I was doing?"

Jim sat next to him. "Nah. See, he was the one standing out there in the middle of a fire fight between two serial killers, one deranged FBI agent and one ruggedly handsome homicide detective."
"Jim's probably still working on a 'what do you think you were doing' speech that might be able to encompass all of the rules we've broken in the past week. And I'm not going to be the pot calling the kettle black. You missed a fast shootout, Catherine, once Agent Starling got involved."

"So was it her who shot me or Millander?" Catherine asked as if they were discussing a case. "I had my back to them at the time. Went straight through back to front, cracking my collar bone but going and hitting Lecter I think." She glanced at her shoulder. "I noticed the cut more."

"Millander," Gil told her. "Starling went down when Lecter did, just to try to help him. We're... mostly sure that he's dead."

"Mostly sure?" Catherine asked still looking at him amazed.

"Millander is dead. Lecter nearly escaped from the FBI -- again- and Millander was expecting it. His boat was out the front, Lecter took it and he had a detonator and blew it to pieces. Then Millander died after he said sorry to Gil," Jim summarized. "Sara shot Agent Starling with Grissom's gun."

Catherine looked at them both. "I'm feeling left out. I didn't shoot anyone."

"You got to jump on the back of a dangerous killer," Gil offered, eyeing her. "I didn't get to shoot anyone either, if we're keeping a tally."

"And that's because you are CSIs who should leave the shooting and things to us," Jim said patting Gil's hand a little theatrically.

Catherine raised an eyebrow. "I'm still amazed you didn't get hurt."

"It's a genuine fucking miracle, Cath," Jim said with utter seriousness. "I'm going to call the Pope collect when we get home."

Catherine couldn't help herself. Her lips twitched and then she started laughing, trying very hard to keep her shoulder still as she did so.

"But is there a patron saint for idiots who walk into gunfire? Or does that just default to 'lost causes', and St. Jude?" Gil grinned a little, over Catherine's laughing. He knew he made mistakes, and as long as he admitted to it... well, it made life easier for everyone.

"C'mere Gil. I've missed that smile," Catherine beckoned him over. "Give me a hug and tell me I'm forgiven for screwing up with you and Millander. I might believe it now I've done something about it."

Gil leaned in, and hugged her very gently, careful not to touch her shoulder. He was going to have to stop trying to count random physical contact, because somewhere along the way it had moved past the point of being numerable. "Catherine, you didn't screw anything up in the first place."

"Well I think I did, and you'd forgive anyone anything apart from maybe messing up a crime scene," Catherine murmured in his ear, hugging him back a bit weakly. "And though I value your opinion, Gil, my own tends to be the one that shouts the loudest."

"That's good. That's the one that matters most." It was hard not to keep smiling as he waited for her pressure to release a little so he could pull back. "There's nothing to forgive you for, Catherine. I mean that."

She did and lay back wincing. "Yeah, well you think on the fact that I was so scared of losing you that tackling the most notorious serial killer of our time without any sort of weapon seemed like a
"I was thinking roughly the same thing, but I had a gun," Jim said a little smugly. "I call it planning."

"Deep forethought," Gil agreed, smiling still. "For both of you. I almost went in there armed with just a pack of cigarettes. But I left them in the car."

"Just as well," Catherine said seriously. "Those things could kill you, Gil."

It was such an incongruously funny thing that Gil wasn't surprised to hear Jim just start laughing helplessly.

"She's got you there, Gil."

"Since we've cut out two things that could kill me, I shouldn't play with an extra one, huh?" It was hard not to laugh a little, and he reached for Catherine's hand. "How about we cut a deal. I'll quit again if you rest a lot and get better."

"I can do that," Catherine said squeezing his hand. "And I've got an excuse for being like this -- good drugs. You guys? No excuse."

"Euphoria from the rush of a solved case?" Gil sat back a little, smiling back at her. "Cases. Life can go back to normal now."

"Well, when we all come off of sick leave, yeah," Catherine replied. "And you shouldn't have been back working anyway. Don't forget that."

"It doesn't change that I'm still back at work to stay," Gil countered glibly. It probably wasn't sane, but the lab needed to come back together. They needed to get work done again, and if he could work, and think again, maybe he could pull himself back together one piece faster.

"Don't push it," Catherine warned leaning back against her pillow. "Jim, talk some sense into him?"

Jim looked at Gil. "That might take some time, Cath."

She smiled a little. "The rest of your life right?"

She smiled back. "You got it."

If he didn't know better, there was a conspiracy against him, and the two of them were at the center of it. "Anything I can do for you until they let you out, Catherine?"

"Visit once in a while," Catherine replied. "If only to stop Eddie rifling my pockets for credit cards. I'll be okay, I'll be out of here soon enough."

She was looking tired though. She'd done a good job of pretending she wasn't that hurt, and that she was fine. Gil knew at least part of that pretending was to herself.

"I'll come visit and read you entomology books." He said that with a sly smile, just to see the look on her face. "We could start with aphids and move to bagworms."

She hit at him with her mobile arm. "Save that for Sara. We'll just gossip, and you can sneak food in -- that isn't bugs -- and all the things we did for you."

"Everything?" He glanced to Jim, and then winked when he looked back to Catherine. "Food we can do. And news."
"I'll make due." She shifted a bit uncomfortably. "Don't mess up the fact I caught up on your paperwork for you."

Jim raised his eyebrows. "Teacher's pet."

"Yeah, well welcome to the club, Jim," Catherine said. "I'm going to have to throw you guys out. I think my wake up pill is running out."

"That's our cue to leave. Keep resting, okay, Catherine? Hopefully the next time I talk to you at least one of the others will be out of the hospital." Probably Sara.

"Good. Put ourselves back together piece by piece," she said as Jim stood up and then leaned over and kissed her briefly.

"You take care, Cath. And thanks," he murmured. She nodded in response.

Gil didn't move to kiss her, but squeezed her hand again. "Thanks, Catherine. You really saved my life. So you should listen to yourself, because you more than made up for whatever you thought you did wrong."

She smiled then, a smile that was free and easy. "Thanks, Grissom. Think I might sleep for a week or so now. Got plenty to catch up on."

"C'mon, Gil," Jim murmured slipping a hand around him again. "Let's do our last visit."

"You don't have to physically drag me there, Jim. I'm going. We'll see you, Catherine," Gil said, one last time, as Jim did pull him out the door.

Jim looked at him. "I've seen you get that look when you're trying a little too hard to stay focused. She'll be out of it in a matter of minutes," he said as they started walking.

"You've seen that look a lot recently. But I really don't need to drag me up to see Sara." After all, he knew what he'd be dealing with there. It was familiar ground. Disappointment after having seen something from the inside out. Hopefully she wouldn't want to go to the FBI.

"Well, she knows about us now so maybe the pressure is off," Jim replied. "On the other hand, you did just hand yourself over to certain death for her sake. Things like that can turn someone's head."

"I would have done it for any of them, Jim. They're my team, and they're..." Family. Even Sara. Except that if he tried to slot them into roles, he wouldn't be able to, but they mattered to him. "I'd put my neck on the line for any of them."

"And they've all proven they'd do it for you, too," Jim replied. "There's not many who could say that, I guess. Millander knew who to go after." He cleared his throat. "She thought you brought her to Vegas for something more, Gil. It hasn't been long enough for that hope to die. Hope is a pretty long lived thing sometimes."

"Is that jealousy I hear in your voice, Jim?" He was letting Jim lead again, following because it was easier. "I brought her because she was the best for the job. And we had an opening. She was a good student."

"I don't get jealous," Jim said calmly. "Of course, I'm also a compulsive liar."

"But a good one. I hadn't noticed that you were." Huh. Jim was jealous, and it was completely unfounded. "She's... she's Sara, Jim. She's a good investigator and I'm not supposed to start justifying
myself until I've moved in with you, am I?"

Jim half smiled. "You don't ever have to justify yourself to me, Gil. I'm just feeling a little... overprotective. It makes me act like an idiot. I see me, in my prime, of course, but... yeah, and then there's Sara who's smart, young and pretty good looking and crazy about you. I've been pretty bad recently about telling you what you should and shouldn't be doing."

"You have?" He twisted a little and cocked an eyebrow at Jim. "How? Elaborate for me."

Jim shrugged. "Every day things. What you want to eat, how we're going somewhere. Telling you you can't drive. It used to drive Janice crazy."

Ah. So that was the problem.

"Actually, Jim, the doctor gave me a sheet that dictates what I can eat for about the next six months. I technically shouldn't be driving yet, but I'm going to continue driving too soon, just not with any frequency yet." He paused while they waited for the elevator doors to open. "You see it as nagging. And maybe it is. It's been a rough couple of weeks, and I'm lucky to have been functioning. Sometimes I need someone to pull my strings. Just don't get comfortable doing it, I'll take them back pretty soon."

Jim smiled a little. "I think I can live with that," he said. "I make a lousy puppet master." They stepped into the elevator heading up to the wards. "But I really want to go home and just... be with you. You didn't sleep earlier, did you?"

"Nope." Gil lifted his chin a little, peering over at Jim from the corner of his eye. "I needed quiet to get my head together. One day I might actually manage it."

"I promise I won't say a word tonight then," Jim said sounding serious. "This looks like her room."

"Do you want to come in... ?" Gil asked, eyeing Jim as he stepped towards the door a little.

"Do you want me to come in?" Jim asked holding back a little.

"It might be easier if you didn't." He only said that because Sara was hurt and Gil understood how she thought, how he thought. She'd act differently if there was an audience.

Just like he would.

"I won't take long."

Jim just nodded and turned to find the nearest chair, even as he knocked on the door and pushed it open.

Sara was sitting up in bed, her arm in a sling, disconsolately flicking through channels on her TV and she turned at the noise and smiled. "Hey, Grissom."

"Hi." He glanced over his shoulder for a moment, and then closed the door behind him. "I thought I should come up to see how you were doing."

"Well, my arm is still attached and now it's back in its socket, which is a lot more comfortable than the alternative," Sara replied. She was looking at him with a curiously intense expression. "So, I heard Lecter blew up?"

"Detonated when he tried to get on Millander's boat. Millander had anticipated the move, and had a
detonator in his hand. I unwittingly helped him set it off." Unwittingly was a good word for it, since he'd been oddly enough just trying to ease a dying man's last few moments. Even after what the man had done to him in the first place.

The worse part was, he was more than a little suspicious that Millander might have been doing it all for him. But that was a thought he wasn't deliberately looking at.

Sara nodded. "Did I... did I kill Agent Starling?" she asked suddenly.

"No. She's actually in this building, under armed guard and pending transfer to a secure facility. Probably a mental ward." She needed to be there, because she needed help, and even if she never had her career back... She deserved a chance at life again. Possibly. Depending on what she'd aided Lecter in doing while they'd been together.

It was hard for Gil to judge a victim, and it wasn't his place.

Sara visibly relaxed and it occurred to him that Sara might not have ever fired a gun with intent before except at the range. "Good. I hope they can do something for her. With the pregnancy and everything." She lapsed into silence and it was just that hint of awkwardness he couldn't avoid.

"They're sure she won't lose it." It was the most he could add -- after all, that child's best hope for a normal life was to be adopted early so they didn't end up under the microscope as a psychopath's child. Nurture could easily overcome nature. "How're you feeling?"

"Like a maniac dislocated my arm and then threw me in a pit. And then my boss pulled me out," Sara said tilting her head a little. "How about you?"

"Like I haven't slept in a day or so, and smoked too much while I was awake." Honesty met honesty, and Gil knew it was the best he could offer.

"I used to smoke," Sara said almost randomly and it made Gil wonder how well she was dealing with all this. "For about a week when I was a student." She stopped a moment and looked at him for a disconcertingly long time. "So... you and Jim, huh?"

Part of him wanted to snark 'apparently'. He didn't get the point of making it a topic of conversation, but he never had. It simply was, one way or the other. So he gave a shrug. "Yeah."

"Wow." Sara looked at him. "Guess my track record still holds then. Falling for totally unavailable guys."

It probably would look that way, and it was somehow worse that she seemed so resigned to the fact. As if she was doomed to repeat that mistake over and over.

"Sara..." Gil pulled the chair out, and sat down, frowning a little as he looked at her. "I wouldn't call it a track record."

"Grissom, you're not the first. Unavailable or unsuitable, take your pick," Sara caught herself doing a shrug and wince. "Ow. That was stupid. It's okay -- it's a... thing. A thing I do."

"We could compare bad track records, Sara. I cheated on a very loving woman with a serial killer. I'm not exactly a catch. I'm insufficient in a lot of ways. Consider it a dodged bullet," he suggested gently.

"Grissom, you are the catch," Sara replied with a hint of teasing in her voice. "Looks like we're all going to have to go to Brass for fishing tips." She exhaled a little. "No, it's good. It's good to know
where I stand, and good to know it's not specifically about me."

She sounded solid and positive about that, as if she was doing a good job convincing herself.

That was probably where she needed to start, because nothing that Gil said would matter if she didn't want to believe it. Same as with Catherine. "It's not about you, Sara. A... quite a few years ago, Jim and I... had an incident, a misunderstanding, and this was impetus for... us to work it out."

Sara nodded a little. "And I thought it was Catherine. Some CSI I am, huh? Sure you want me to stick around?"

"Yeah, I'm sure, Sara. Eddie thought Catherine was cheating with me, too. But Catherine is like a sister to me." He managed a smile at her, slight and a little tired. A sister who didn't tease him much about his copy of QVegas out in the bathroom.

"So you two have never..." Sara started and then held back. "Sorry. Forget I asked. I'm going to kill Sanders for telling me that...." She paused again and added. "If... If he makes it."

It was hard to kill the already dead. "He's starting to turn around. The doctors seemed optimistic when we stopped there earlier. Nick's visiting with him right now. It's going to take a while, but."

"That's great," Sara said and she did genuinely seem pleased. "The statistics for Anthrax are... pretty bad. I didn't like to say anything, but I'm guessing he already knew." Conversation with Sara could be like this, bursts of activity and then uncomfortable silence. "How's Catherine?"

"She's resting, but she also has a good prognosis. The wounds were clean and she can move a little better than I expected." But he tended not to move at all when he was injured, or as little as possible in the first day. Maybe it was the nature of the injury.

"I didn't know what Millander was going to do after she put down the gun. She just stood there and let him hit her," Sara said slightly amazement. "I think I might have... I don't know. And then she turned up at the boat place. I thought she was out of it you know?"

"Catherine? No, Catherine is never out of it." Gil couldn't help but smile a bit. "Trust me. Did I ever tell you that she worked a scene less than twenty-four hours after she had Lindsey? I'm not the only workaholic around here."

Sara smiled a bit at that. "And you recruit the best workaholics, too." She looked at him. "Things aren't going to be awkward now, are they? Now I've sort of come out and said everything?"

"No. I don't see any reason why they should be awkward, Sara. I... definitely won't hold bad taste in men against you," he joked quietly. "You're a good CSI, and I consider you a good friend. I know if I'd been in the pit, you would've done the same for me."

"Well, you're heavier so I might have had a few problems," Sara smiled at him again. "Glad to see you're getting your sense of humor back though. Hopefully everyone will be less on edge and I can actually get a decent night's sleep in my own bed."

"I think life can go back to normal now," Gil agreed hopefully. "Jack was going to talk to the sheriff, see if maybe he can give us a couple of night's leeway before we go back to catching up on our backlog. I think everyone is a little burnt out right now."

"I think it's the least we deserve. You realize we're all going to end up on the news. They've probably got the stock photos out as we speak," Sara said. "You know, the ones that are years out of date."
"At least yours is years out of date and not decades. I know what stock photo they're going to use of me." Will. Me and Will, and he was still working through that. And no matter what Jim hoped that was going to take a long time. But at least he was trying, now, and he hadn't been before.

"You should get a new one, I was watching some of the news. Found out things about the others I never knew," Sara said. "Never knew Nick's family is all practically in Law enforcement. Or that Sanders was a free ride and ..."

"All you need to do is ask, Sara. Greg could talk about that for hours if you let him. And about the interesting things he saw in New York. Nick's father's a judge, his mother is a lawyer." Gil was purposefully avoiding the news, but he had his reasons for that. He knew these things already, little bits that he picked up from people.

"Well we didn't all get off on the right foot with my recommendation about Warrick," Sara replied. "I guess I'm just wondering where to go. I was seriously thinking about the FBI, you know that but... Catherine just stood there and put herself in total danger to stop me being killed. Greg slammed the door shut on me and stopped me from running back into that room. I can't just ignore that. I don't know if that's the sort of thing you could find anywhere else."

"That's trust and friendship, Sara. No matter what start you got off to, I think you've been accepted since then. The FBI... Jack wants you to join. And I think you've seen how he works."

"Yeah. Yeah. I mean he's an okay guy but..." Sara shook her head. "He kept pushing for you to be taking all the risks. That's not right."

"He did that to Agent Starling. He did it to everyone else he took under his wing. If you seriously want to go that route, Sara... Wait a few years. Vegas will be good for your resume, and he'll retire soon. No chance of him influencing your career from what you really want to do." It was just a counsel of caution, but Sara was still young, and she had so many bright years ahead of her, so much more research.

"I'd like to stay, I think," Sara replied. "Though with this case on our records, I think all of us are hot commodities." She smiled a little. "Especially you, Grissom. You got credit for saving the Mason wife and son, as well as alerting the authorities to the show down. Sorry, but I think your name has probably gone international."

"Again." Gil watched her faint, almost timid smile. "I don't think I'll bother changing my name again."

"We'd all get confused and just call you Grissom anyway," Sara replied. "It's gonna be weird over the next couple of weeks. Maybe when Greg gets out, and Catherine, we could all go out together or something."

"That sounds good. It's been a while since we did that. Jim was probably still the boss the last time the team did that. Is there anything you want me to bring you, since we'll be back later tonight or tomorrow?"

"Maybe something to read," Sara said. "Though I'll be out soon. They just want to check that there isn't more damage in the joint when the swelling has gone down."

"I wouldn't make any effort to get out early, after everything that's happened. And when you do get out, call one of us. You shouldn't have to take a taxi home." Hopefully her car wasn't a stick, or she wouldn't be driving at all for a couple of weeks while the joint was kept immobilized.
"I will, Grissom," Sara replied settling back. "You better go get some rest. You look like you need it."

"It might actually be restful sleep as long as I don't dream I'm at work." Gil took that as an invitation to leave, and stood up, pushing the chair back. "You rest, too, okay?"

She nodded. "If they let me get up any time, I'll go and visit our department," she said with a smile. "At least there are people here to talk to."

Grissom reckoned she was in for another surprise when it came to Greg and Nick. He wasn't exactly sure why he wasn't surprised himself. It might just be because at the moment he was more than a little emotionally numb.

Maybe later he'd register surprise. When he was at home. Trying to talk Jim into letting him eat popcorn or something. "Nick and Greg are down two floors, and Catherine's on the same floor, but probably not for too much longer. I think Warrick was spending time with his grandmother today, but he'll be around."

Maybe later he'd register surprise. When he was at home. Trying to talk Jim into letting him eat popcorn or something. "Nick and Greg are down two floors, and Catherine's on the same floor, but probably not for too much longer. I think Warrick was spending time with his grandmother today, but he'll be around." Anyone sane would take time with their loved ones after he was almost badly burned. And when they'd been living in the lab, Warrick and a bottle of aloe were never far apart.

Jim had told him that Lecter had poured gas over Warrick, and when he jumped through the flames, it had ignited. Jim had a few minor burns here and there but he shrugged them off as not even as bad as cooking accidents. Warrick's had been worse and his hair had to be cut right back.

Sara nodded. "Okay Griss, thanks for stopping by." She looked like she meant it, too.

"Get better." He was headed for the door, trying to look like he wasn't making a break for it when there was a good chance that he was. He closed the door behind him, and immediately looked for Jim.

Jim was sitting, leaned back against the wall with his eyes closed until he heard the door click and then he opened them. "Done already?" he asked. "I didn't hear any raised voices."

"There wasn't any arguing. And I think she's going to stay in Vegas. Now that the air's been cleared a little." Or some equivalent to it. Gil was just sure that Sara understood that it wasn't personal.

"That's good news," Jim said getting up and stretching unobtrusively. "Now, how about we sneak out of here and head back to my place. And maybe get into bed and stay there?"

"Do you mean that honestly, or innuendo laden?" Gil waited for him to get his bearing, and then fell into place with Jim once they started down the hall.

"Possibly honestly at least to start with," Jim replied. "Although I'm always up for some innuendo." He smiled a little. "I just thought you could do with the quiet."

"I appreciate the opportunity for quiet. We could be quiet..." He turned his head a little, just to catch the look on Jim's face.

Jim was looking at him still, with that hint of concern still present. "I can do quiet. If quiet involves just holding on to each other. Sounds like a pretty good plan to me."

"The s-word, right?" It was enough to make Gil want to laugh again, but he just smirked a little while they headed for the elevator again. It was better to see what happened when they got home than it was to plan.
"You know I'm not meant to say that in public," Jim said gravely, but reached around his back to usher him into the elevator and let his hand linger there deliberately.

"It might make you look less manly," Gil deadpanned when he let Jim push the button for the floor that they'd parked on. "We'll come up with a better term for it. You have a thesaurus, right?"

"Somewhere. I think you had it out for the crossword puzzles," Jim said easily enough. "You want anything else to eat before we get to that point?"

"Why, do you want to stop somewhere? If you have an idea, I'm game." And if Jim wanted just to go home, then Gil was game.

"Not particularly," Jim answered. "I just thought I'd give you the option. To be honest, I'm pretty tired."

"Then we'll go home. I don't particularly want to media dodge anyway." Gil leaned back against the elevator door, taking a moment to steel himself in case there were any of them still lurking around in the parking garage. They'd been kicked out of the hospital, they couldn't be kicked out of the parking lot.

"I could clear the area for you," Jim teased just a little. "Like the crime scenes."

"It'll take too long. I think we can just rush them." He wasn't sure of that, but it was worth a try. The elevator doors opened, and there was nothing for them to do but head out to face the day.

"Just act natural..." Jim said and strode forward as if there weren't some media vans over in the corner of the parking lot with various film crews sitting around having coffee. They hadn't as yet been spotted.

As long as they walked calmly and right towards Jim's car, they'd be all right. And if Gil kept telling himself that, maybe the Easter bunny existed outside of a mall during Easter.

It wasn't far, but on the other hand it wasn’t short enough. The moment one of them looked around it was like a tidal wave of reporters descending upon them and Jim sighed. "Should've known that was coming..."

"Mr. Grissom? Mr. Grissom! Can you give us a statement about what happened earlier on today?"

"Mr. Grissom! Is it true that both serial killers are dead? And that most of your team has been critically injured?"

"Mr. Grissom, did you trade yourself to the serial killers? An exchange of hostages?"

"I'm not making any statements. All questions should be deferred to the sheriff's office!" Gil held his hands up a little, and he started to try to walk faster. Eight cars down, Jim's car was just eight cars down.

They crowded close, almost literally surrounding them to the point of claustrophobia and they were brought to an halt as they clamored questions at him, camera lights in his face until Jim looked like he was going to lose his temper, and put and arm around him to shield him from some of it.

"You know what? You could cut us some slack here, guys..." he said to them. "We've had a hard day and a hard few weeks, and you should know better than to ask for details of a case until the evidence is in. Truth is, we can't tell you because with everything that was going on, we don't know all the answers. But I can tell you that CSI Catherine Willows is going to pull through despite being
shot and stabbed in the incident, and CSI Sara Sidle should be out in a few days if she doesn't need further surgery on a shoulder injury. Try reporting the good news, huh? Now if you'll excuse us, and I'm asking you nicely to get out of our way, otherwise I might just give in to my irritable side... we both want to go home." Then he started moving with the sort of unstoppable momentum that clearly indicated if someone blocked him, he would be stomping all over them in no time flat.

Gil could follow in his wake, stepping into the spaces that Jim cleared for him. It was easy just to take that opening, and not say anything, even when he heard one reporter call out, "Will Graham!" Keep walking, and he only left Jim's shadow to move to the passenger side of the car.

Jim unlocked the car, coming in to shield Gil as he did so, seeing him in safely before he moved around, and literally walking at them until they were pushed out of the way. Then he got in and in silence turned on the ignition and slowly and steadily pulled away, making them all hop hastily to one side.

"Bastards." he muttered under his breath.

"They're right up there with lawyers." Gil closed his eyes, and pretended for one brief moment that the speed bump that jolted the vehicle was a reporter. Or at least a reporter's foot. "That'll take a few weeks to die down, unless some new interesting bloodbath crops up sooner."

"I really really want to be at home right now," Jim said. "This seems stupid but I have the biggest headache in the world and I would quite willingly run over a few reporters to get nearer to the painkillers."

"Does this mean I have the opportunity to make you relax instead of the other way around?" Gil didn't bother to open his eyes yet, but he could imagine the line between Jim's eyebrows.

"As the plan is to go home and go to bed, I don't think you'll need to do much," Jim replied, going a little too fast through Vegas. "Anyway, I'm sure Jack will throw plenty of Press Conferences their way, so we won't have to worry."

"He didn't used to do that. He'll probably have flow charts explaining it. Once upon a time, Jack was all tough cop and no bureaucracy. He was easier to stand then."

"I might have actually liked him then," Jim said after a pause. "But I guess I'm a little biased. I get that way when somebody exploits people I care for."

And while he could have focused on the exploitation comment, Gil concentrated on the 'people I care for' part of the sentence, letting that rattle warmly around in his brain for a moment. He liked it, the strange lack of effort, and the ease of just almost waking up in a relationship. No dating, no weirdness, no getting to know each other. "Mm."

"You know the more I think about it, I can be a bad tempered son of a bitch," Jim mused. "Maybe I should send him flowers to apologize. Something carnivorous maybe."

"And still alive. We could get him a healthy venus flytrap. There was this one guy on the internet who fed one of them bits of calluses, and they digested it admirably." Gil sat up a little straighter, and finally looked over at Jim. So he wasn't frowning as much as Gil had expected.

"I think he'd appreciate it," Jim said with a smirk curling at the edge of his mouth. "What were you doing reading about that sort of thing?"
"Not sleeping?" Gil suggested with a little amusement in his voice. Jim should have caught on by then that Gil didn't sleep unless he was exhausted, emotionally or physically, and even then he sometimes had nightmares. And there was no sense in explaining them to Jim. It wouldn't alleviate them.

"Well I guess I know where your vast knowledge of everything random comes from," Jim answered. He didn't say anything else but it was a clear message of 'I get it' under his response.

And that was good. "If insomnia strikes, I promise not to shake you awake if I read something interesting."

"I'm good at answering in my sleep," Jim replied even as he took the turn that meant they weren't far from home.

It was now Gil started to realize how tired all of them must be. Jim had been working and then dealing with all of this as well. He'd not been sleeping, working harder than he should. Catherine had dark circles under her eyes to match the bruising on her face. Nick had looked haggard and Sara was wound to the awkward heights of tension.

It was a natural state for Gil, though. He functioned like that, had for years and years, but he didn't like what it did to his friends. "If I didn't know better I'd think you were doing that now."

"You're probably right. I'm... too much 'in my prime' for all this," Jim said even as he pulled up outside his building. "Just don't stand between me and the Tylenol."

Gil waited for Jim to put the brake on, and popped the passenger door open once he'd turned the car off. "If you head straight for it, I'll grab you a glass of water."

"For that, you get to pick what side of the bed you want," Jim replied even as they both got out and he locked up. "If I'm going to feel like I've got a hangover, then I wish I'd drunk the beer to go with it."

"Does beer interact with Tylenol?" Gil asked, a little rhetorically while he followed Jim. He hadn't actually slept the night over in his own apartment in a while. The last time they'd been there had been to pick up clothes and things for him before they stayed at the hotel room.

"Probably," Jim answered as he opened the front door. "Guess I should be glad they cleaned up and left the place tidy. And restocked the fridge." He was already moving over towards the stairs. "You mind bringing it up? I'd appreciate it."

"Yeah. I'll meet you up there, Jim." It was hard to keep a little worry out of his voice, but it was stupid. If Jim were actually mentioning discomfort, it was probably profound. And it had probably started when Gil had been talking with Sara.

Jim seemed so laid back about things that it was hard to imagine him getting wound up or stressed by anything outside of the sort of situation they had been through. But he'd been calm through most of that. After all he hadn't actually hit Jack despite numerous threats. It seemed odd he would get most stressed when it came to facing emotional conflict.

Jim went up the stairs and he just caught a glimpse of him rubbing at his temples and the bridge of his nose as he went out of sight. Had he really been so worried about him and Sara?

Gil couldn't be sure, so he meandered around Jim's kitchen a little. Water, and a beer just for the hell
of it, and he stopped in the bathroom on the way back to the bedroom to grab the Tylenol in case Jim hadn't.

He found Jim lying on the bed with his eyes shut, half-undressed as if he'd given up halfway through and decided lying down was a good idea. The other man opened an eye. "You're a saint. As soon as I talk to the Vatican collect, anyway."

"You mentioned thanking the Pope for a miracle, too." Gil sat on the edge of the bed, and offered Jim the pills from his hand that was holding the water glass. "I brought you a beer just in case. I might need it, since I just realized that I haven't talked to my mother since this all started."

"I thought you were going to email her?" Jim asked taking the pills and water and knocking them back. "She'll have seen by now, Gil. Hard to miss."

"She's probably mailed me. I haven't checked it," Gil grimaced. "I should probably do that now or I'm not going to be able to sleep." He halfway offered Jim the beer, just in case.

"Take it. I'll stick with the hard stuff," Jim said looking at the water. "You want me, just call, okay?"

"I'll just crawl into bed with you," Gil told him seriously when he stood up. He hesitated, and then he reached to pull the blankets up over Jim a little better. "I'll get the blinds for you."

"Thanks, Gil," Jim exhaled and closed his eyes again. "It's just a headache. Nothing much. You talk to your mom."

Well, mail. Well, read his mail and then respond and face that fact that he owed her at least a visit and a personal apology because he'd let it get that far.

Gil closed the blinds, and watched Jim for a minute, lying in bed so tired and vulnerable and hurt. It made Gil want to crawl into bed behind him again, to lend what little physical protection he could, which was just absurd. Jim was a grown man, and probably better in a fight than Gil was. But he could feel that warm protective urge, a tangible ball of emotion, a little strange comfort that he wasn't completely emotionally numb.

That was oddly important now, because he knew he would start questioning himself, wondering if he was damaged mentally and had no normal responses to trust in. This was something anyone would do and it was a spark of warmth in himself. Jim had a headache, scarcely the end of the world, but it was strange because for once he needed him, not Gil being the one constantly needing support. That was... something different from before. Something new and he wanted to hold on to it.

It was a little hope for normalcy, and Gil wanted that. He wanted that feeling of just being, without any worrying, of just being at ease. That was more important than who needed whom, but if there was a sense of balance, then everything else was easier.

Gil lingered for a little longer, and then he wandered downstairs to where Jim kept his laptop.

Somewhere in his mind he was starting to wonder if they had just made the decision to move in together. His place was comfortable, but he didn't have a huge emotional attachment to it. He was pretty sure that Jim didn't have a huge attachment to this place, especially after what happened. It might be a case of them finding somewhere new, somewhere bigger together.

For once that thought didn't worry him. Well, not too much.

He watched the laptop boot up. He could explain why he hadn't brought it up with his mother. Why he had refused to have her contacted as next of kin. Actually that was a lie. He did know. She would
have come to visit him and immediately have become the biggest target in Lecter and Millander's
game. Tit for tat. Lecter killed Millander's mother, the logical step would have been to attack his.
Instead it was Greg and... He still felt a little strange and unsettled about it happening to Greg. It was
meant to happen to one of his team, he was sure of that, but in intercepting that particular 'bullet', it
had made Greg into one of their team, lab tech or not.

Greg had always tried to be one of them, spending more time with the CSIs than the other techs, and
Gil now knew he'd be twice as hard pressed to cut Greg out of anything now. He was just going to
have to get used to the fact that Greg was one of them, and possibly one with Nick. Time would tell
there, and Gil hoped things worked out just for the sanctity of the working environment in the lab.

He wasn't sure if he would have found slipping into whatever it was he and Jim had fallen into
would have been so easy if Jim had still been the boss. In fact, he knew it wouldn't. He had thought
he'd known Jim pretty well, and he'd still been surprised. Jim had been able to fake blow ups of
temper, he'd seen him do interrogation and realized that Jim was a master at assessing what was the
right tactic to use.

Jack had thought Jim too stupid to last with Gil, and Jim was self-deprecating enough to let that slip
past. But when it came down to it, he knew how and when to act and that was a form of intelligence
most people didn't possess. When he looked back on what had happened, Jim had chosen without
fail the right course in the instant of crisis. The one that saved the most lives, that got the right result.
Now that was a talent Grissom thought he had to work hard at.

Except for what had happened with Holly, and that... that was an anomaly. He could see that Jim
had just wanted her to be shadowing a long-term CSI, even if it was a punishment for Warrick. That
it had ended that way...

Gil brought up the browser, and typed in the address to access his web mail. If he thought like that
much longer he'd have a headache too.

When he logged in it was nearly enough to make him flinch. It was full of messages. Messages from
friends, acquaintances that he'd given his mail address too -- filled with titles like, 'Heard what
happened...', 'Saw the news...', 'Couldn't believe it...'

And sure enough, there were about a dozen from his mom, with progressively urgent looking titles.
The last one entitled, 'For God's sake let me know if you are even alive!', indicated that when they
did speak, he was probably going to get some very sarcastic comments.

He decided to click on that one first and just dive right in. It was better than looking at mails from
colleagues and acquaintances who were worried or shocked by what had happened. After all, it was
his life, his friend's life, not theirs.

'Gilbert, for God's sake, just call, write anything. I can't believe I'm seeing and hearing all this from
the news. First that you were critically injured -- and I have no idea why on earth I wasn't contacted
over that! -- and now that there was some sort of shoot out with that terrible man and they just say
that there were injuries and deaths. Please, please just tell me you're okay. I think I understand that
you were trying to protect me, like you were by changing your name to my maiden name. It was
easy enough to do that with you but this... I'm terrified for you. I know what he did to you last time
and then there is another as well?

Is it over? Can I come see you? Please answer, Gilbert.

Love,
Mom'
He hit 'reply' without thinking, and it was only then that his fingers hesitated on the keys. Did he explain from the beginning, or just assume she knew, or? He didn't think he could explain torture to her without his hands starting to shake, strangely, while he didn't have any problem with it as spoken words.

Maybe that was the difference. His brain was wired differently from having signed for most of his life. Words were just words, insufficient, while motion and expression and hands...

_I'm sorry that I haven't replied until now. I wanted you to be safe until this ended, and it's over now. It's finally over. Lecter is gone._

He hesitated again. It wasn't a lie, it was a truth. He didn't know if Lecter was dead for sure, and they were still looking for his remains, but every day that passed without them finding at least a chunk of the man was one more day that Gil suspected he was still alive and kicking.

But he was gone.

_And Paul Millander is dead. I'm mostly all right, but some of my friends are a little worse for wear. I know I owe you an explanation, but I can't really give you one. Not a satisfying one. I'd rather have you alive and angry at me than dead because I couldn't protect you. A lot of my friends and coworkers were injured in what happened._

I'd like to see you, particularly now that things are quiet again. It's up to you whether you'd prefer to come out here or if you can wait until I get vacation leave and can get out there to California. The lab's more than a little backed up right now, and I'm still getting used to being the supervisor since Jim was moved back to homicide.

I love you.

Gil.

It probably wasn't enough to placate her, but it was a start in the right direction. He knew he couldn't have done anything else and his head had been too full of conflict in himself to make him guilty over not contacting her. She would understand. Eventually.

He was considering ignoring the rest even as he sent that reply when one unusual title jumped out. "Hello Dad -- Message from Kevin."

That was... not supposed to happen. Gil looked at it, and the messages around it -- mostly concerned notes from colleagues, even a message from Dr. Bloom, but a few pieces of spam mail -- and quietly decided that if that was spam, he was going to have to find someone more computer savvy than him to hunt down the person who'd sent it.

So he could hit them. Repeatedly.

Gil looked at the subject line for a few more minutes, and then clicked on the touch pad to open it.

_Hi Dad,_

_I expect this is a big surprise right? I'm not sure I'm doing the right thing or not but I'm nearly thirty and even though Mom still thinks me as her little boy I'm not. It feels pretty strange calling someone else apart from my dad, Dad, but I think I can cope._

_See, I only just put it together after watching the news. Mom didn't know that I knew Will Graham was my father. It was one of the reasons I did forensic anthropology and artistry -- we had some_
pretty spectacular fights over that, but my dad, Adam, said I would be safer than following him out onto the streets as a cop, which was my other option. I worked it all out when I was at college and I felt good that I had, but also angry that you had left me and Mom. A bit later on, I worked out that relationships weren't that cut and dried and I think I assumed you and Mom had broken up and had a really nasty divorce.

In a round about way, I'm sort of apologizing for thinking badly of you. Don't get me wrong, I wasn't obsessing over it, and it hasn't stopped me doing what I've wanted and being good at it, but it's always been something... unfinished.

I was following the news -- you'll laugh at this but I attended one of your lectures at a conference in L.A. and was so impressed I got some of your books. So I was interested in what had happened to Gil Grissom.

And then the news revealed that Gil Grissom was actually Will Graham and you'd been forced to change your name to protect your family.

To say I was struck dumb was an understatement. I sat at work staring into space for an hour. I walked around most of the day oblivious.

Mom and I talked a bit. She told me some more, and I got your email from her. I wasn't sure if I would use it, but I can't see how I could not. I'm not sure what I want to do with this, only that I want to say I'd like to know you somehow. If it's through email first, that's fine. If you don't want to talk, I understand that too. I just feel like I nearly lost the chance to ever know my dad, and was given a second chance to do so. I know it's going to be rough for a while, so no pressure.

Hope I might hear from you.

Your Son
Kevin.

He almost wished it had been a spam message and not an incomprehensible thing that he couldn't think of how to answer. Gil closed his eyes for a moment and rested his head back against the back of the sofa. Kevin had known him as dad, and his dad had been a cop and then left, and there'd been a shooting there in the house. But there had been no reason to link 'dad' to 'Will Graham' and if it hadn't been for the news, no chance that Gil Grissom would've been linked to Will Graham back to...

Gil's head hurt. Gil's head hurt and he didn't know where to start. Molly had mentioned Kevin's interest in Gil Graham, shit, Grissom's work to him, but he hadn't ever thought there was too much chance of being caught out. After all, a boy's fuzzy memories didn't stand up so well to the modern day, and he still probably wasn't what Kevin expected. He'd known Adam as a father for longer than he'd had Gil.

There was still a part of him that thought of him as young, as a kid. And then it was a case of readjusting his mental sights as he realized Sanders was younger and Nicky.... Nicky was about the same age as his son.

If anyone asked him if they were capable of dealing with something like this he would have said yes, they had the right to make their own decisions, but this was his son. Kevin. He'd been so young when they got married and had him. Too young, but he'd loved him and that had been the worst thing. Not that he and Molly had split, but that he'd had to give up Kevin to protect him.

He'd somehow managed to juggle Molly and Kevin and finishing up his degree, and starting a new
job, and he'd carved hours out of the day to spend time with them, tried to lavish them with attention between stops and starts in cases. Maybe too much attention, but he'd wanted to make a point not to be his own father. Absentee to start with and then just... gone. Instead it had gone the other way, too-present to start with and then gone.

Gil wasn't sure that one was better than the other.

He read over the letter again, and then hit reply.

Kevin,

This was unexpected. I'd always expected that you'd put two and two together, since you were there when your mother shot Dollarhyde because my gun jammed. But I never expected you to find out that I hadn't just disappeared. I'm not sure what to say.

I didn't want to leave your mother. I didn't. She left me, but we'd come to an understanding that it was for your safety that she was doing it. Given everything that had happened, we both decided that you needed a stable life more than you needed me in your life. I've been in contact with Molly and Alan since they married, and they've kept me updated from afar about how you've been doing. I wouldn't call it a nasty divorce. I still love your mother. I'd do anything to protect her.

Things are still a little 'rough' for me right now, but I'd like to get to know you again, Kevin. Your mother told me that you went to the forensics conference in London this year. How was it?

He hesitated for a moment. It was a start, a way to keep up conversation. Gil waffled over what to sign it, Will or Gil, and settled on 'your chronologically first dad'.

Then he hit send.

There it was. A sudden big step in his life made with the click of a button. But wasn't it what he had secretly wanted? That he'd felt cheated from knowing his son. The times he sat and looked at the photographs and wished he could just talk to his son.

And now it was safe, as safe as it could be to do that. Maybe Millander had given him something after all. Balancing the scales of justice that he hunted for so long.

He wasn't going to tell Jim that he thought that, just that his son had mailed him. And that his mother was pissed off, but he'd expected that. Gil scanned over the rest of the mail, and decided that all of them, even Dr. Bloom's mail, could wait until he woke up. Turning the computer off was as easy as closing the lid and setting it on the table, and Gil started towards the stairs.

His son had just mailed him, and that mixed in with everything else that was going on in him, making for another strange protective feeling.

He wasn't sure what he was feeling. He wasn't sure where it was going to go and maybe it would go wrong but, it was a chance he had never had before. It was also a reason to reconcile the Will Graham and Gil Grissom factions in his head. They didn't need to be separate any more. In fact, they needed to be the same person so he could acknowledge his past. It was like a switch being turned in his head, allowing himself let down barriers he had spent a long time holding up.

Suddenly he just wanted to be able to show someone that he cared. That he was able to feel and care.

He'd done it before, and then somewhere along the line, and he could pinpoint when, caring had become being apart from people and feeling was best expressed by not dealing with people that he could hurt.
Gil hesitated for a moment just inside the bedroom door. Under a month, and he was already thinking stray thoughts like moving in. Or something akin to that. Sane people waited years, but then again, Molly had been the same way. It just happened and it was there and the short timeline didn't matter.

Jim was already asleep, or something close to it.

He was sprawled out with his eyes closed in the middle of the bed and Grissom smiled a little. He shouldn't wake him up. Jim had been up with him most of the time and working. But he wanted to tell someone.

It could wait.

He undressed hastily and contemplated which side of the bed to get in. He had about the same space on either side, so it was more of a placing preference than anything. Gil moved to the right side, and pulled the sheets down before slipping in. He had to move Jim's arm, but that was easy.

"You know, I could lift that for you," Jim said after he'd very carefully moved the arm and lain down next to him. He'd cracked open an eye to look at him.

"I was planning on saving you the trouble." The mattress creaked a little when he shifted, settling in, the sound of old broken in box springs. "How's your head?"

"Tylenol is winning -- just," Jim replied. "How was the mail?"

"Gravely concerned. My mother is angry at me, and I expect she'll be inviting herself down for a visit very soon. And my son wrote me an email. Kevin apparently put two and two together with CNN's help. Or some news outlet." Gil shifted a little closer, and tugged at the pillow.

"Your son?" Jim opened his eyes and looked at him, before shifting closer back towards him. "Well there's something I wasn't expecting. You okay?"

"Yeah. He wants to get to know me. It wasn't a bad email, if that's what you're asking," Gil closed his own eyes, and finally started to relax. "I think I'm finally doing better than okay."

"Do I detect a hint of... happiness there?" Jim asked twisting a little to look at him. He paused a moment and then used the position to kiss him lightly. "Hmm?"

"You ask that as if I'm not the blood demanding insect eating overexcited evidence collector of the lab," Gil deadpanned. "Just one neat case, and you'll be sick of happy."

Jim chuckled a little. "I can stand being sick of that." He brushed at Gil's hair gently for no reason apart from the fact he wanted to and just looked at him for a long moment. "You know something? I think I could stand pretty much anything just to have you around."

"I think I could, too." Stand pretty much anything from Jim, not the other way around. He'd met Jim when he'd been hitting the bottle too hard, and he'd still liked him. Everything since then had been an improvement, nothing that Gil felt an urge to change or add to. He shifted, fingers sliding along Jim's sides. "Go to sleep. We can try deeper thoughts in the morning."

"Just make sure you sleep, too." Jim turned back on his side. "And as we're not in public, we can do the other s-word."

Gil shifted, taking the opportunity to slide his arm over Jim's waist, fingers pressing against the slight squish that covered muscles. If he kept his eyes open, he ended up looking right at Jim's bald spot.
Yeah, they were in their prime all right.

"Sex?"

"Sex is never something I like to rule out," Jim said and he could hear the smile even though he couldn't see it. "I was talking about... snuggling. That has got to be the most embarrassing word that exists."

"We could call it sleep's foreplay," Gil murmured, pressing his nose against the nape of Jim's neck.

"That has a much more masculine guy feel to it," Jim agreed. "Gimme some of that sleep foreplay Gil, oh, yeah."

He couldn't help but laugh, even as he laid his head down on the pillow. "Use that tone of voice again, and that headache is going to be the last thing on your mind."

"I'll save it for the morning then when I can do it a bit more justice," Jim sounded a little apologetic about that. "Something to look forward to hmm?"

"And here I was already looking forward to a good night's sleep." Jim had to guess that he was teasing, but if he wasn't sure, Gil could clear it up in the morning.

He could clear everything up in the morning.

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