

## a howling in the factory yard

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*I woke up this morning thinking about Turkish drummers; it didn't take long -- I don't know much about Turkish drummers -- but it made me think of Germany, and the guy who sold me cigarettes who'd been in the Afghan secret police, who made the observation that it's hard to live. Then I was reminded of the proprietor of a Vietnamese restaurant in Quebec, who used to be head of the secret police in Da Nang -- and it occurred to me I was thinking about all this stuff to keep from thinking about something else -- isn't that just what secret police are all about?*

-- Bruce Cockburn

*"You fool. As if it matters, how a man falls down."*

*"When the fall is all that's left, it matters."*

-- *The Lion In Winter*

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**i. january**

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*there's guards at the on ramps, armed to the teeth  
and you may case the grounds from the Cascades to Puget Sound  
but you are not permitted to leave  
-- The Postal Service*

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departed before sunrise on the morning of 26 december 2007, having provided a detailed itinerary & finalized mission plan to general o'neill.

i traveled via greyhound to seattle over the next three days, arriving on the afternoon of 29 december 2007. after showering, changing, and eating, i set forth to perform reconnaissance of farrow-marshall industries (henceforth known as fmi) in an attempt to determine the optimal plan to begin accomplishing the stated mission objectives (see appendix a for details of the orders i had received).

as 29 december 2007 was a saturday, and more precisely, the saturday falling in between christmas and new year's, i believed that my approach would go unnoticed. however, upon arrival at the fmi headquarters at the corner of fourth and seneca streets, i discovered a full complement of building security, who were understandably curious as to the reasons for my presence in their lobby. not wishing to raise suspicion, as i had at that point identified no fewer than six recording devices in the lobby and was certain my presence had been noticed (and would be remarked upon later upon security review of the tapes in question), i chose option two of the planned approach vectors and requested to be brought to the presence of kevin balim, aka the goa'uld ba'al, believing him likely to be present in the building or nearby.

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i was taken to a security office under the supervision of richard schroeder, chief security officer for fmi's headquarters building, and detained & questioned there. though lacking external indications such as the ritual tattoos, i believed at the time that schroeder was jaffa, a suspicion later confirmed. i reiterated my request to speak with ba'al, and provided schroeder with sufficient information to identify me to ba'al (or at least to pique his curiosity).

after an hour of waiting, ba'al arrived in the security office and ordered surveillance removed. at this point, i presented my identity to ba'al and provided the agreed-upon cover story, offering my services to ba'al in exchange for my dual-stated purposes of a). obtaining "revenge" on general o'neill, stargate command, and the team known as sg-1; b). obtaining transportation offworld at some future unspecified time. though ba'al was dubious as to my motivations, he did not have me taken out and killed, so i was at least permitted to make my case. we arrived at the mutual conclusion that, though he did not trust me, he would provide me with the opportunity to prove that i had his best interests and the best interests of his organization at heart. after a complex period of negotiation in which there was surprisingly little hitting, i was instructed to retrieve my belongings from the motel which i had been planning to use as home base while scouting out the lay of the land and join ba'al at the fmi corporate housing

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condominium hotel, located at third and seneca streets, where i would be provided with a furnished apartment and briefed on further duties before my official december 31 starting date as an employee of fmi.

while i had been hoping to retain a level of free agency for several additional days, which i had been planning to use to finalize my informational channels, test my ability to hold my cover under public scrutiny, and become more familiar with seattle and environs, i was forced to assume from that point onward that ba'al had me under surveillance and act accordingly. my miscalculation in terms of the order in which i performed these tasks was critical and severe, and did prevent a significant amount of informational flow. fortunately, several channels had been agreed-upon before the commencement of this operation. though these channels were shallow and unsuited to extended discussions, my conduct at all times had to be in accordance with my cover identity and therefore i was prevented from making extended reports or communications.

after further personal negotiations with ba'al in an attempt to establish my bona fides, i arrived at fmi headquarters on the morning of december 31. at this time, i was assigned to supervise a team of computer professionals who were and had been attempting to deploy electronic intrusion measures against the

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There's someone in the bed with him. He can hear the breathing: soft, even, melodious. The sound of someone who belongs there, confident and self-assured.

That part isn't new.

He tells himself, eyes wide and open in the dark, feeling the weight of the covers pressing down against his skin, that the other body is Mitchell. That if he wanted to, he could throw out a hand, let it rest on the curve of Mitchell's hip, feel the weight of muscle and bone and scars beside him: unmasked-for blessing, unhelped-for salvation, lover and partner and frontman and ZIC and entire world.

Then he moves wrong, or he gives himself away, and the body next to him opens eyes that flash luminescent gold.

Naquadah-eyes. Snake eyes. (*He who plays at dice with death must expect the dog's throw; how long has humanity feared those two golden glimpses in the night? Why are we here? Because we're here. Roll the bones.*)

"Go to sleep," the monster he's lying next to purrs softly, before going back to whatever worlds it's conquering inside its mind. A parody of tenderness: that part's the worst. Brings back memories, ones better left untouched. He'd known, coming here, that he'd have to think about them again. Jail cell, halfway across the galaxy. Knives and acid and self-assured hands, on his skin, against his body; go away, go inside, wait for it to be over. Can't do that this time. Has to make the snake think he likes it.

The room's dark. (Dark and hideous; high-powered high-rise corporate condo hotel suite, home sweet home for the foreseeable future, Ikea-meets-Norman-Rockwell and just as soulless.) Doesn't matter. Snake can see him anyway.

He closes his eyes. Obedient, placid. Good little boy, willing to give the snake what it wants in exchange for what the snake can give him. He aches everywhere, tender and bruised, but the days when he can afford to notice those little details are long gone. Alive, unsnake: those are his key indicators of success right now, and he's running two-for-two. He can handle a little bit of discomfort; Mitchell deals with --

*Don't think about Mitchell.* Don't think about anything but the mission. The key to a successful undercover operation is to be who you're pretending to be, even down in the depths of your mind where nobody but you can hear. He's spent every single fucking moment of the past twenty-four hours convincing the snake that he is who the snake wants him to be. If he spends equal time convincing *himself*, he's got a chance of pulling it off.

The clone. The copy. Seething with resentment, simmering with hatred, a skin full of rage with no possible outlet, ready to blow any fucking minute and not really caring who'll get hit in the explosion. Made himself smarter than O'Neill. Made himself stronger than O'Neill. Wants to find his way back into O'Neill's shoes, without any of the resources he might need to make the transition, and looking to ally with someone -- anyone -- who can give him the edge he'll need to succeed. Even an old enemy. (The enemy of his enemy might not be his friend, but can at least be an ally.) Such a fine line to walk. Interesting enough, valuable enough, to be trusted. (Eventually. Once he earns it.) Spirited enough, strong enough, to be allied with, rather than subsumed. Total capitulation would be suspicious. Total resistance would get him killed. There's not much of a middle ground there.

So he concentrates on keeping his breathing even, calm. He isn't fooling anybody, but it's important he makes the effort anyway. It's what his shadow-self would do.

Eventually the snake lets itself out. He fights the impulse for as long as possible -- the room is bugged; it would be foolish for Ba'al to place him in a room that was *not* bugged, and therefore he must assume he is being watched -- but in the end, he can't help it. He gets up and walks, still naked, into the bathroom. Big enough to hold a party in. He doesn't care. All he cares about is the shower.

Bruises on his arms. On his thighs. Snake strength; snake power. He turns the water on as hot as he can bear, stands beneath the spray. He can still feel the snake's hands, running over his ink, fascinated by the lines. Asking about the stories limned there. Had to give some of them up; couldn't be helped. Snake could read part of them, anyway. He'd lied about most of it. Spun it into something that fit the person the snake thinks he is. Still makes him feel dirty, to have said the words. Dirtier than the snake's hands on his skin. Dirtier than the snake's stolen body pressed up against his. But not sharing would be suspicious. They'd made a bargain. He'd guessed the snake would want access to his body (again), but he hadn't quite remembered how much the snake would feel entitled to his thoughts.

He crouches beneath the spray and blanks his thoughts. Mindfulness can come later. Much later. He's already accepted he'll have to set some principles aside for the time being. Today is the first day of a game he didn't particularly want to play, for stakes higher than he ever thought he'd play for again, and he doesn't have time to be squeamish. He's got a job to do, and he needs to be the person who can do it. No matter what it takes.

Eventually the hot water runs out. He doesn't notice until the needle spray turns freezing, shocks him back into his body, his self. He shuts off the taps with a hand that's steadier than he thinks it probably should be. He still doesn't feel clean. The towels are luxurious and comfortable, fluffy and oversized and soft as a whisper. That almost makes it worse.

When he sleeps, his dreams are a patchwork. A country he hasn't visited in twenty-five years. A language he no longer admits to anyone that he knows. The bare fevered memory-fragments he retains of a snake slithering down his throat. Waking up in a cold white box. Sunrise.

He doesn't sleep long.

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Downtown Seattle. He'd been hoping he'd have more of a chance to build up a mental map before he went under, scope out the lay of the land and learn as much as he could before walking into Farrow-Marshall and starting the ball rolling. (And he's still *fucking pissed* at himself for having gotten caught, but you don't begin an operation like this already kicking yourself for your fuckups, so he doesn't let himself dwell.) Ba'al gave him a cell phone, a Bluetooth earpiece; he's supposed to wear it at all times. He's not stupid enough to think it's the only method Ba'al has for tracking him, and he doesn't want to find out what'll happen to him if he "forgets" to shove the phone in his pocket.

He spends Sunday exploring: down to the building's weight room for his morning workout, then up and out and away we go. He's testing the snake as much as the snake's testing him; the snake wants to watch what he does and how he does it, and he wants to

watch how the snake watches him. Sure enough, he's only a few blocks away from the condo building before he notices that he's being followed: big men in black cars with tinted windows. (Earpiece radio, like Secret Service. No tattoos on their foreheads, but he knows better than most people what marks a sarcophagus can erase. He wonders if they really are Jaffa, and if so, how Ba'al managed to find Jaffa who could learn enough about American culture to avoid suspicion.)

He's careful not to even look like he's trying to make contact with anyone. He knows better than to think that the men he sees watching him are the only ones observing his behavior.

Instead, he just keeps running. Morning workout. Nothing to see here. Just him and Seattle, waiting to be discovered. He can't remember who first taught him the mnemonic for the order of downtown streets, but he's known it for a while: Jesus Christ Made Seattle Under Protest. It's catchy. Farrow-Marshall owns three full blocks between Third and Fourth under dummy corporations: Madison to Spring, Spring to Seneca, Seneca to University. The condo building is at Third & Spring; his rooms are on the sixteenth floor, while Ba'al has (of course) the penthouse. Main office building is Fourth and Seneca. It's a nice area. He wouldn't mind living here. If it had been his choice.

He's pondering keeping going all the way up to Seattle U, weighing the pros and cons of a good long run up hill and dale with his thighs burning and his mind fucking *quiet*, when the cell phone buzzes. Makes him jump. He'd already forgotten he was carrying the fucking thing. The phone itself is shoved in his back pocket. The wireless headset clips to the shell of his ear, no heavier than heavy-gauge piercing jewelry, and rests not in his ear canal but against the side of his skull. Bone conduction, both to transmit and to receive. The connection hums to life without him consciously deciding to answer the phone; he isn't allowed the luxury of sending calls to voice mail.

"You weren't trying to go somewhere, were you, Jack?" Ba'al purrs. Crystal clear reception. Of course. The snake's voice sounds like it's coming from right over his shoulder, from inside his own fucking *skull*, and the pit of his stomach turns over. Add it to the list of things he's not allowed to think about. It's nothing but technology. Nothing more.

He bends over and rests his hands on his thighs, gulps for air. Dodging pedestrians and dirty looks on a crowded city street, the stop-start-stop of waiting for red lights and cars making right turns, makes his running a hell of a lot more intermittent than it is back -- than it is when he doesn't have to worry about those little details; he's been running twice as fast as he really should, to compensate. The snake's giving him a chance to protest innocence, to explain his activity, so he doesn't bother. He doesn't want to get used to justifying himself to a fucking snake. Doesn't want the snake to get used to him justifying himself, either. "Yeah," he says. "Out for a run. You need a quart of milk while I'm out here?"

Ba'al laughs, soft and silken and malicious. Makes his fucking skin crawl. "I'll take a cappuccino, actually," it says, and hangs up.

The dialtone sings in his ear, cuts out after a second. He alters his trajectory, cuts three blocks over, wrong way down a one-way street. It's a petty victory; his minders will catch up with him anyway. It's a lovely clear winter day, the kind that's so rare as to be a precious jewel; for once, it's not raining. Clear enough that he can just see Mt. Rainier, peeking through the buildings and the few faint clouds on the horizon. A couple of pedestrians swear at him as he weaves his way through the crowd, dancing on light feet through the push and crush of foot traffic.

Little tiny independent coffee shop over on First, across from the Harbor Steps, one of the last holdouts against the Great Starbucksification of Seattle. When he gets there, he runs past it without turning his head to look, then drops down to a jog and turns around. *Honey, I'm home. Oh, shit, forgot the ice cream at the office.* He waits in line -- it's a popular place -- and shifts his weight from foot to foot, feigning impatience. Couple of dirty looks from the people around him; he ignores them and studies the chalkboard menu with its pastel handwritten items, its freehand margin drawings. When it's his turn, he orders a latte for himself, a cappuccino for his notional lord and master.

The barista doesn't even give him a second glance; he's no different than the other thousand people who have been through these doors so far today. No smiles. No chitchat. He fishes a few bills out of his jeans pocket and hands them over to pay for his order, barely glancing down at their faces, then pulls another dollar bill, crumpled and damp with his sweat, from the depths of his pocket. He presses it flat against the counter, folds it in half both lengthwise and widthwise, and drops it into the tip jar. As an afterthought, he adds the coins he gets in change. He shoves the bills the cashier hands him back into his pocket and gathers up the cups in both hands; he doesn't look back as he turns to leave.

A little while after he's gone, he knows, somebody behind the counter -- he doesn't know who, and he doesn't want to know -- will decide, seemingly on a whim, to tidy the bills in the tip jar. Pull out the wad of cash, straighten each bill, bundle them together. Unfold the amateur origami and put it, unremarked upon, with the others. Anyone watching won't even notice eyes flicking down to the serial number of the bill. Old code, one he's been using for decades. If the second number of the serial number is odd, it means everything's going according to plan. Second number even, things are heating up but still okay. Drop a five in the jar, it means to check the next drop-box in the cycle, for important information. No tip at all means he's about to disappear and will make contact again when he's ready to surface.

The route the information will have to take to get back to O'Neill is circuitous and tortured; O'Neill won't be getting the intel for a few more days, still. Shallow information channel. Single bytes of information, a lone and lonely ping in the wilderness: *present and accounted for*. All hands mustered. Hi-ho, we're away to spur and saddle; into the frontier we go.

When he gets back to the condo building, he doesn't bother with the elevator; he runs all thirty flights of stairs up to Ba'al's penthouse, careful to keep the coffee from sloshing. He doesn't stop to shower first. Let the snake think he's at its beck and call; he'll play along. For now. But that doesn't mean he can't show his contempt in a thousand small ways. He wouldn't want the snake to get too complacent, after all.

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Monday. He rises with the dawn, slips out to go running; it's smart to establish your patterns as soon as you can. Snake doesn't even let him get out of downtown before it yanks him back, this time. He swallows the snarl and goes to get the fucking coffee.

He hadn't exactly been expecting torches in the corridors and gold lamé uniforms, but when building security gives him his ID badge and instructions to report to the executive floor, he's expecting something with a little more flair than fluorescent lights. The Evil Overlord's lair shouldn't be carpeted in industrial grey.

Elevator opens up onto a reception area: curved wooden walls, glass-and-metal reception desk occupied by a pretty young man. Looks Filipino. Black hair, worn long, tied back in a neat ponytail; a tiny diamond winks at one earlobe. Wearing a black suit that looks like it probably cost a couple grand. Doesn't look up from the purposeful mouse-clicking.

He glances around himself; the hallways on both sides are blocked by clear glass walls, the doors controlled by keycard readers. "Mr. Balim is expecting you," the receptionist says, still without looking up, and gestures a hand at the door set into the wooden wall behind him.

He puts some extra swagger in his hips as he strides across the reception area, cup of coffee in either hand. He doesn't know who else in residence knows who, what he is, who knows there's something other than an arrogant teenager behind his fuck-you stride. In his jeans and t-shirt (still clammy from his morning workout, his morning run on the damp and misty streets of dear old muggy home sweet home) he sticks out like a sore thumb, in this quietly elegant Pacific Northwest corporate enclave. The artwork on the walls alone probably cost more than the entire house in --

Stop. Rewind. The door the receptionist pointed at opens automatically just as he's nearing it. He walks through it without stopping, as though he'd been expecting it to open for him. (Lesson learned a long time ago: when startled, when nervous, step forward.) There's another hallway behind the door, stretching out with nondescript doors on either side. At the end is a glass-walled office, lavishly appointed; in front of it, another desk, this one occupied by a young woman who's just as attractive as the receptionist outside, in an entirely different way. Her blonde hair is worn long too, piled on top of her head in a bun that's secured by three hairsticks. She's wearing a silk kaftan in imperial purple, stiff and heavy with golden embroidery.

Behind her, in the fishbowl office, the snake is sitting behind a desk made of elegant bloodwood. It's wearing a grey pinstripe suit and a tasteful blue tie, shuffling papers from one stack to another on the desk. Beyond it, out the floor-to-ceiling windows, Seattle stretches out, disappearing into the grey and haze of a dreary winter morning, yesterday's perfect clear day nothing but a memory.

He comes to a stop in front of Esmeralda the Wonder Secretary's desk. "Mr. Balim is expecting me," he says, trying for a snide impersonation of the guy at front reception. His shoulderblades itch with the knowledge that he's standing at the end of a hallway that only *looks* deserted; he doesn't know who's lurking behind those doors, who might be behind him. Can't show it, though. Here in this building, he's playing Balim's pet, arrogant and self-assured.

The woman looks up, and *something* -- in her face, in her voice -- makes the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He'd been cloned without the naquadah in his blood that O'Neill had never admitted to (out loud), lingering remnants of that brief and disastrous trip to Tok'raville. Its lack is a weakness. He'd never wanted it, never let anyone know he could use it, but it'd come in fucking handy here-and-now. Without the itchy pins-and-needles, spiders-under-the-skin sense of snake radar, he's reduced to observation, analysis, instinct. He'd give a lot to know if he's creeped out by her because she's a snake or a Jaffa or just otherwise somehow *wrong*.

"Yes," she says, his attitude seemingly rolling right off her. "He is. You can go in."

He does so, juggling the cups of coffee so he can open the glass door to the snake's office. It's odd; he would have predicted the snake would want concealment, want to be able to hide away in its office with nobody able to observe. Like this, it's on display. Maybe it wants to keep an eye on things.

"Good morning, Jack," the snake says, not looking up. "I trust you slept well."

He ignores it. "Pissed in your coffee again," he says, shoving it onto the corner of Ba'al-or-Balim's desk. "Tomorrow I'll shit in it."

The snake shows teeth. Not a smile, except in the way it is: graciousness in victory, the satisfaction of someone who's got the upper hand and is enjoying watching a captive struggle. The familiarity makes his stomach turn again. "I had wondered yesterday what the special flavor was, yes," it says. Pops off the lid of the cappuccino, takes a deep swig, unconcerned at the prospect of any additives. They both know he's lying. It'd be too suspicious if he didn't rattle the bars of the cage, though; he's presented himself to Ba'al as a wild card, and he has to play the role to the hilt.

He rocks on the balls of his feet. Light. Balanced. Ready for anything. Weeks, months, to get ready for this -- physically, mentally -- and he still feels too slow, too sluggish. No way to defend himself if the snake decides he'd be a good addition to the Snake Army. It's a risk he has to take. He's banking on Ba'al wanting to conquer him first, to bring him to heel before putting a snake in his head. He's banking on Ba'al believing it can control him better as a human, without having to struggle with a snake's ambition and a snake's potential treachery. Still, the back of his throat itches: sense-memory, the feeling of soft tissue tearing and rearranging, and then, the blackness.

Don't think about it.

"What's on the agenda?" he asks. "Bet you've got a lot of questions to ask me."

"I do, yes," the snake says, standing up. "And I'd like to introduce you to the executive team. And then I'll introduce you *to your* team."

He keeps his voice even, controlled. The snake has a habit of dropping little pearls like that and waiting to see how he'll react. So he doesn't react. "I'm not exactly a team player."

The snake smiles again. "Learn to be."

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Introductions.

Mayfield, executive VP, analytics. Blonde woman, pretty smile, dead eyes. Bezian, executive VP, global dev and acquisitions. Mid-forties, tall, solid, a dangerous man trying to appear less dangerous than he is. Cocumél, executive VP, operations. Slender and greying, wearing glasses whose lenses look so thin that they're probably cosmetic rather than correctional. Roberts, executive VP, strategy. Black man, shaved head, too young for the senior position he holds; he looks barely twenty-five. Yao, CFO. Tiny Asian woman, her waist-length hair in a hundred little braids, each beaded and belled. Rickowski, CTO. The only one dressed less formally than full business armor, aging hippie complete with full beard and long grey hair, looks like he was probably programming mainframes back in the day.

He has no fucking idea which of them, if any, might be snakes. Which of them know what's going on. Ba'al doesn't enlighten him.

He's being given a team of four, reporting to Rickowski on paper, actually reporting directly to Ba'al. The snake knows about Nielson-Mitchell, knows the extent of his technical talent. It also knows that talent doesn't surface overnight; if he has it, O'Neill must have had it too, must know things that only someone who was there would know. So he's being put in charge of the group that's been trying to crack the SGC's security, on the theory that an insider will know all the ways to hammer down the doors.

He doesn't ask why Ba'al wants the network broken. O'Neill had said that Ba'al hasn't managed to get people inside Homeworld, inside the SGC -- that all the snake's information is coming through its plants in the NID -- but neither of them is willing to bet the bank on it; they aren't naive enough to think their intel is perfect. But the fact the snake wants him trying to crack the system is a good sign that it might be the truth. If Ba'al had people in the SGC, it wouldn't need him to break in.



Unless it already *has* broken in, or it already has people on the inside, and it wants to put him through his paces, cross-verify against already known intel. Test of loyalty: will he tell it the things it already knows to be true?

No way of knowing which, but one thing is clear; Ba'al is getting information from *somewhere*. O'Neill had told him about the last operative who'd tried covert infiltration. Nobody knows how Ba'al managed to spot the guy as a ringer. He has no intention of sharing that fate. It's why he chose the method he did; impossible to blow a cover story when it isn't a story at all, and the only parts he's actually lying about are things the snake can't actually verify, like his desires and goals and motivations. Mitchell had protested this particular tactic, but --

Don't think about Mitchell.

The snake hands him over to Rickowski, who leads him out of the executive playpen and keycards him through one of the glass doors leading off the reception area, down the hall, through another door. That one's glass too, but it's the first one he's seen up here that isn't transparent; some grey-smoked coating opaques it. Rickowski doesn't give him a guided tour, but he thinks this is where the snake keeps all the projects that *don't* fit into the model of a nice normal multinational conglomerate. Rickowski just leads him over to a cube pod in the corner, tucked away from the rest of the teams, and leaves him there without performing introductions; "Mr. Balim would like to see you after lunch," is all he gets.

He's left eyeing the four people who are eyeing him back. He sticks his hands in the pockets of his jeans and tries for "causal slouch", despite the fact that he's spent all morning on high alert. "Hey," he says. "Might as well show me the toys."

Four of them, one of him. He'd been thinking that his apparent calendar age would work against him, but the former leader of the team doesn't look to be much older: Virta, first name unknown, a skinny kid with strong cheekbones, buzz-cut blond hair, and skin white enough to indicate that he probably hasn't seen the sun in months, if not years. Virta seems friendly enough; he's the one to make the introductions, last names only. Chen, early twenties, face neutral and iPod earbuds in his ears, speaks with a heavy Chinese accent that necessitates fierce listening despite the fact that the words being spoken are impeccable English. Suzukimo, probably twenty-five or twenty-six, possibly Japanese, possibly Korean; her hair is short, spiky, and purple. Cacirelli, early twenties, brown hair, indeterminate ethnicity, who sets off every single damn one of his subconscious sentries; he wonders if Cacirelli might be a snake. (Wouldn't put it past Ba'al to have another snake on the team. Someone to keep an eye on things. Someone to report back.)

Only takes a few minutes for him to realize they're all smart as fuck, casually amoral, and damn fucking good hackers *and* crackers at once. Only takes a few minutes after that for him to realize Virta's the smartest. Alpha geek. They get the dick-waving out of the way fast enough; Virta seems willing to accept him, pursuant to a demonstration of his talents, and they're down to talking tech inside of half an hour. The team's good. Too good; it's a wonder they *haven't* broken the system yet.

Eventually they go to lunch. (Topic of conversation: the no-surprises-*there* study Ohio just released on voting machine security. "Please," Chen says, with a snort; "we already knew that. There were three separate groups trying to sell the '06 midterm elections." Pause, smirk. "I was on the team that actually managed to do it.") Virta keeps watching him, out of the corner of one eye, when nobody else is watching. He ignores it; he wasn't expecting to be bosom buddies up front.

He leaves them after lunch, with promises to bring in his deconstructions of the vulnerabilities in the Dual\_EC\_DRBG random number generator tomorrow. Started the analysis as a lark. He and Mitchell (*don't think about --*) had kicked around the notion of doubling as security consultants in between software jobs. Turned to it more seriously when the security press as a whole started paying more attention to the flaws in the algorithm. He'd been thinking of publishing the paper, establishing some credibility in the security world, when this whole thing had blown up in his face. Now he's glad he didn't. Easier to pretend to be a black hat if your name isn't scrawled all over the white-hat blogs.

He's halfway down the hallway when the cell phone in his back pocket vibrates. "You're late for your appointment," Ba'al says in his ear.

"Didn't know I had one," he snaps back. Nobody around him looks at him oddly; he's not the only one wearing an earpiece, and the spectacle of people apparently talking to themselves is probably common. "If you want me to keep a set schedule, get me a secretary." Rickowski hadn't specified a time, just that Ba'al wanted to see him after lunch. If this isn't just the snake yanking his chain, if Rickowski *had* been instructed to tell him a specific time, it means Rickowski is trying to fuck him. He'll have to keep an eye out for that.

"Perhaps I will," the snake says. "Conference room four. Melissa will show you where it is."

Click.

Melissa turns out to be the real name of Esmeralda the Wonder Secretary, the one that pings all of his sense of *wrong*; the more he watches her, the more he wishes for that built-in snake radar. She brings him to a tiny conference room, where Ba'al and Cocomé are waiting. "Have a seat, Jack," the snake invites. "We have some ... questions."

So. Cocomé's a snake after all. Or at least a human-or-Jaffa in on the plan. Good to know.

He spends the rest of the afternoon in the too-close quarters (snake to the left of him, snake to the right of him) spilling his guts about the SGC's secrets. Singing like a canary, la la la, anything the fuckers want to know. Fooled you: he doesn't know anything of strategic value, not anymore. Changed the codes, locked the doors, as soon as they'd realized what Loki had done; all his information is four years out of date. Still, they ask about the people, about the processes. Friendly little chat. Nothing at all like the interrogation techniques he learned in his days at Ft. Benning, the tricks he had used on him in Iraq. There's no torture, no coercion. Just a couple of buddies shooting the breeze. They don't even lock the door to keep him from getting out.

In exchange for this courtesy, he doesn't try to get out. Tidy little arrangement all around. He answers their questions, whole and complete. It makes his stomach turn to rat out his friends -- breaking his oaths, breaking his commitments; *betrayal* -- but it needs to be done. Ba'al's got people in the NID anyway. O'Neill and Barrett think anywhere up to half the active agents might be on the snake's payroll. It's unlikely he's telling the snake anything the snake doesn't already know, and he's pretty sure this interrogation is less about gaining information and more about finding out what information he's willing to give. So he gives it all. Proof of his willingness to cooperate. *Yes, I'll play ball.*

Even if it makes him feel dirty.

It's New Year's Eve, but the building's still busy when he gets out of his little kaffeeklatsch around dinnertime. Either Ba'al doesn't believe in giving holidays, or it offers generous bonuses for working through them. The snake doesn't want his company tonight -- which means the snake wants to see what he'll do when he isn't being watched, which of course means the snake is going to be watching him. Or having people watch him. So he just heads back over to the cubicle pod where he's been given a desk, intending to log on to the mainframe with the ID Rickowski provided him; he might as well kill an hour or two setting up his system before heading back to the Godawful corporate housing.

Rest of 'his' team's taken off for the evening, except for Virta, who's got his (bare) feet on the desk, his keyboard in his lap, and a pair of state-of-the-art monster headphones, not on his ears, but around his neck. Tinny music comes from them; he can't tell what Virta's listening to, distorted as it is, but it sounds like it has a heavy bass line. Virta's fingers are on the keyboard, but he's not typing, just drumming his fingers lightly on the keycaps and staring at one of the four monitors on his desk.

"Hey," he says, as he passes by Virta's side of the cube, drops down into his own desk chair. Two to a cube, one on each side, the walls just high enough to see over when you're sitting down. Virta's his cubemate. Between the time he went to lunch and now, the IT Faeries deposited another desktop and a laptop on his desk, bringing his hardware booty up to match the rest of the team's: two desktops, each dual-screened, and an entertaining assortment of peripherals. He pulls one keyboard closer to him and reaches down to boot Desktop #1.

"Hey," Virta says: distracted, absentminded. Tap, tap, tap. He wonders if Virta even knows he's here, if the return greeting was automatic; he's been told that *he's* had entire conversations with Mitchell (*don't think about Mitchell*) while deep in hack mode, without retaining a word of them later. But a minute later, just as he's setting up his `.bashrc` with all the aliases he can't live without, Virta growls softly and lets his feet down from the desk. "Fuck. I don't suppose you know anything at all about sendmail."

"Not much," he says. "Bitch to configure. That's about it. I use gmail."

Virta snorts. "Yeah, thanks, I have no desire to use something cooked up by a rabid weasel. Gimme postfix any day. This isn't for me. I'm *this* close to figuring out how to do something useful with this buffer overflow, but every time I think I'm getting somewhere it falls apart, and I can't tell if it's my code or their config. You got a sec to gimme some eyeballs?"

The fact that Virta's asking at all is a sign that he's already won some respect. "Sure," he says. Wheels his chair over, spins to face the monitor Virta's staring at. Virta's got three or four `xterm` windows open. Virta uses emacs. He decides not to hold it against the kid. "Whose mail you trying to read?"

Virta smirks. "The President's. Here, line 281. I can get the buffer to overflow, I just can't get it to actually execute arbitrary code instead of just triggering a crash. Lemme call up the code I'm trying to inject, it's self-modifying --"

The time it takes Virta to pull up another `xterm`, highlight the sections to show off, gives him enough time to school his expression. He doesn't think Virta's talking about, say, the president of the Thursday night book club. This bunch of Wunderkinder he's been saddled with have never met a lock they didn't want to pick, and the snake seems to be bending over backwards to make sure they're happy to pick the locks the snake points them at. Intellectually, he can understand the appeal: the thrill of challenge, the thrill of being somewhere you're not supposed to be. He's picked a few locks of his own, in his day.

Emotionally, he's horrified. Once upon a time, back when he'd first gotten interested in computing -- far earlier than anyone would ever believe of him -- he'd made himself a promise: it would be for him and him alone. He knew full well that if he'd ever displayed any aptitude, if he'd ever so much as *hinted* at the talent he discovered, his dear and gentle masters would have found some way to use it for their own purposes. (He remembers those days. Height of the Cold War, two years on loan to the boys in the three-letter agencies, part of a short-lived and highly-classified program that was described in cool and bloodless terms like "redistribution of assets" and resulted in lies on his records that claim he was at the Pentagon and nightmares that still surface, just when he thinks they've finally slipped away.) To use those skills now in the service of someone else's interests -- and not just anyone else's, *as* *snake*, *the* snake -- makes him want to claw off his own skin.

Can't be helped.

"Here," Virta says, wiggling the mouse's pointer over the bits he wants to highlight.

He leans in closely and makes himself think of nothing more than the intellectual challenge. "Huh," he says, after a minute. "Yeah. I see why it's driving you batshit. You got that in a code repo somewhere for me to check out, or should I copy it over to my home directory and stare at it from there?"

Virta sighs. "Dammit. I was hoping you'd take a look at it and have a flash of inspiration. I'll copy it over for you so you can glare at it in your spare time. If you get anything, let me know."

"Yeah," he says. Absently. He's still staring at Virta's screen; there's *something* there, but he can't tell what it is. Gonna drive *him* bugfuck nuts, too, now that Virta's shown him. Dammit. "You got any plans for tonight?"

"Nah," Virta says. "Sent everyone off for their New Year's plans already. Caciorelli's going to some LARP thing in Bellevue, Suzukimo has a party at the Wet Spot -- which I *so* did not need to know -- and I don't know what Chen's doing, but he was pretty eager to get out of here. I was just going to chill for a while, do some work. I figured I'd watch the fireworks from the windows later. Once it gets past seven or so, the boss doesn't mind us breaking out the beer, and we can usually con the security guys down in the lobby into bringing the pizza delivery upstairs for us if we order them a pie, too."

"Ham and pineapple on mine," he says, and swivels back to his own workstation.

\*

By the third beer, they're swapping lines of code back and forth like they've been working together forever. By the fourth, someone gets the idea -- he *thinks* it was Virta, but he's not positive -- to see what sort of mischief they can wreak with the fireworks set to go off at the Space Needle in another hour or so, just for shits and giggles.

Turns out the pyro company made the mistake of keeping their controlling computers Internet-connected. And they're running an unpatched version of WinME. "Candy from a *baby*," is Virta's opinion.

The 'technical glitch' that necessitated manual detonation of the fireworks is all over the newspapers on Tuesday morning. By Wednesday, the team's listening to him like he's been directing them forever. On Thursday, he gets a brainwave about what Virta's doing wrong in his sendmail exploit in the middle of another round of 'discussion' with Ba'al and Cocumél, and is saved from the moral dilemma of whether or not to mention it by coming back from the session to find that Virta's had the same idea. Still doesn't work, but it gets them closer.

By Friday, the snake's dropping hints about how *pleased* it is that he's fitting in so well.

\*

Downtown Seattle. He amuses himself while he's running by coming up with other expansions for the street mnemonic. Joint Cooperation Masks Secretly Unleashed Predators. Job's Challenges Mean Secrecy Under Performance.

Yeah, Just Can't Make Stuff Up Perfectly. Whatever.

It's raining today. Big shock there; it's been raining every day since he got here save for one. Today it's a thin drizzle that needles through his t-shirt and jeans to take up rest against his skin, mingling with the sweat to create a layer of damp unpleasantness. He ignores it. He's running up Cherry today, some half-formed notion of heading over to Lake Washington, waving at Mercer Island, running back. Different route each morning. He's starting to get the sense of what's where by now. Two weeks' worth of running every morning, aiming for ten miles or so a day, never quite making it before the snake pulls the puppet-strings again. Gives him a pretty good idea of what the city's like, neighborhood by neighborhood. He's starting to be able to *feel* Seattle, beneath his feet. That can only be an advantage.

Going all right so far. Better than he'd feared. The snake is giving him room, letting him stretch out, letting him get used to things. (Giving him more rope to hang himself. Waiting to see if he's here to cooperate, or if he's here to cause problems.) Mornings he sits in the conference room with it and Cocumél. They've moved along to what-ifs now: asking him what the SGC would do in such-and-such a scenario, what *O'Neill* would do. He can't put together the snake's plans from the questions it asks. He's pretty sure at least half the questions are decoys. What if Farrow-Marshall went public with the program, forced disclosure to the media. What if the IOA withdrew funding from Atlantis. (That one's easy: he has no fucking clue. All he knows about the IOA is that *O'Neill* has about as much use for them as tits on a bull, and he can't exactly relay that opinion without giving away that he's been in touch with *O'Neill*.) Who's got a brain, and who's dead weight.

He answers everything, and watches the snake's reactions, filing them all away in the corners of his thoughts he's earmarked for write-only access. Things he won't let himself think about where the snake can watch him. The snake's always watching him. He's spotted the bugs in the apartment already. Or rather, he's spotted two of the bugs in the apartment already. There are probably more. His life is an open book; he's playing this role for an audience of one, and it's the most critical performance of his life.

When he's running, though, he can loose that control a bit. Let himself think. An hour or two every morning when he can lay down the charade before he has to head back into the lion's den. He's not stupid enough to believe he isn't being watched, but he has a little more leeway.

Afternoons he spends with his team. They're okay. Completely unconcerned about the fine points of morality, but hey, everybody's got weaknesses. He'd hire *Virta* away from the snake in a fucking instant if he could trust the kid longer than it would take to say 'industrial espionage'; the kid's that good. Clever *and* fast, ruthlessly focused, intent on work and capable of ignoring everything else around him in pursuit of a project. Not the type of person he would have ever imagined liking -- black-hat hacker, 0-day exploit writer, hacktivist, phone phreak, born thirty years too late for the "glory days", the type of guy who believes that thirty years ago was the glory days -- but they've both got the habit of working late, and they're starting to have actual *conversations* as they do. He's almost starting to consider *Virta* a friend.

No clue what *Virta* knows, or what the rest of the team knows. He doesn't think they know much. He's pretty sure the snake doesn't explain its plans to a bunch of teenage hackers. (Would be nice if it did; he could wrap this up faster and go the hell back home, because he's reasonably sure that in another few weeks, *Virta* will be eating out of his goddamn hand.) But the snake isn't likely to explain to his information-junkie techno-ronin that the end goal of all the hide-and-go-seek they're playing is total world domination.

Then again, it probably wouldn't matter if the team knew. He's positive they don't actually care about petty concerns like national security (or, hell, the continued survival of the human race); *Suzukimo* just wants to live rich, *Chen's* a Chinese national and doesn't give a fuck about the US government, *Virta's* been taking console-cowboy contract jobs for the highest bidder, including the foreign equivalents of the Three-Letter Agencies, since maturing enough to sound like an adult in email. And he's starting to get convinced that his suspicions were correct, and *Cacirelli is* a goddamn snake. If the snake plays them right, it could have a tiny army of people pulling informational strings across the globe anytime it wanted.

He's one of those people now. The snake lets them pick their own projects, but it steers them. And since he showed up, suddenly the targets have shifted. Before, *Virta* says, they were being aimed mostly at Farrow-Marshall's business competitors. Now, all of a sudden, it's the big guns: the White House, the Pentagon, the military's SIPRnet and NIPRnet, the NSA. The SGC. He's being expected to take point on cracking all the systems he used to have access to in his own right.

He tries not to think that the snake's probably got him trying to break in so it can have proof of his own double agency.

Wouldn't find anything anyway. *O'Neill's* smarter than that. The briefcase boys are looking for him right now, he knows. Putting on a good show, exactly the way they would if he'd gone to ground for real. (Hell, for most of them *it's* real. There are five people who know the true story: *O'Neill*, *Carter*, *Reynolds*, *Barrett*, and -- There are five people who know the true story. He can't help but wonder if that's four too many.) If he's here for long enough, he'll do something that will make himself show up on their radar -- draw money from one of his own bank accounts, use one of his own credit cards -- and let them stage a freakout that he's in the hands of the snake. But he's saving that trick for if he needs more of a cover story. For now, the snake seems to be buying what he's selling.

For now.

The phone buzzes in his back pocket just as he's crossing 23rd. "Good morning, Jack," the snake murmurs in his earpiece. (Starting to forget he's even *wearing* the damn thing; the snake's made it clear he's to have it in at all times, and it's unobtrusive enough that he's even found himself sleeping in it. When he sleeps.) "You're late."

He drops down to a jog, cursing inwardly. He'd just managed to hit the right level of semi-trance-state to get *somereal* thinking done. "You want me punching a timeclock, I'm out of here. I had enough of that for thirty years."

"We're waiting for you," the snake says. "I'll trust you won't forget to stop for coffee."

Click.

Two weeks in. Not dead. Not snaked. Not trusted yet, but that's all right. He wasn't expecting this to be easy.

\*

It takes three weeks for the snake to decide it's wrung him dry of all the useful information it can get out of him right now and drop him into the Happy Hacker Home full-time. He runs the odds, figures it's worth pushing a little: "Is that it?" he demands. "When am I going to get to do something *useful*?"

The snake only smirks. (Makes him want to put a fist in that self-righteous face.) "You are doing something useful. I need the information your team can provide. Get me that, and then we'll talk further."

Careful, calculated. He pushes back the chair he'd been sitting in, kicks the leg once he's standing. "If I'd wanted to do nothing

but sit at a keyboard all day, I wouldn't have bothered coming. At least let me offworld, dammit."

"In time," the snake says. "In time."

He's done his best to make sure the snake thinks he's gunning for revenge against the Asgard, too. It makes sense for the persona he's built, or at least enough sense that the snake might buy it; they're not exactly known for comprehending the subtleties of human motivation. And it gives him a reason why he would have come to the snake, instead of setting up as an independent. He has to keep remembering to push those buttons. Too suspicious for him to just take what the snake hands to him without protest.

The Happy Hacker Haven isn't a bad place to be working. Comfortable chairs. Decent equipment. Fridge stocked with sixteen different kinds of caffeine, hot and cold running snacks throughout the day. The snake believes in keeping its minions happy. It's almost easy to forget why he's really here. Until one of them says or does something to remind him that they're breaking six dozen laws as a matter of course. Until the team decides to go out to lunch and he has to call the snake to tell it he's leaving the building.

Until he stays too late into the night and the snake calls him to let him know it was expecting a booty call.

Not every night. No rhyme or reason. Sometimes the snake wants to fuck him. Sometimes the snake wants him to blow it. Sometimes the snake likes it when he mouths off; sometimes it's annoyed by it. Sometimes the snake brings him up to the penthouse; sometimes it shows up at his door. Sometimes, rarely, it spends the night. Like it wants to fucking *cuddle* or something. (Like it's trying to see if he'll take the chance to attack in the middle of the night.)

He's getting better at pretending that he likes it. He's getting better at not needing to shower as soon as the snake lets itself out.

He's the first one in, most mornings, now. He's not sleeping much. Up by 0500, down to the weight room, out for a run. Snake still calls every time he crosses the invisible line. He's tried to map the outlines of his playpen, the point past which the snake will grab him by the scruff of the neck and haul him back. No rhyme or reason to *that*, either. Some mornings he can go for miles. Some mornings the snake calls him before he's even out of downtown. He'd be happier if there were *patterns*. Something to analyze. Something to predict. It's keeping him off-balance, cranky. Paranoid. (More paranoid.)

First one in. Every morning. Start time's discretionary. Some days Virta doesn't roll in until after everyone else is back from lunch, and Suzukimo is doing polyphasic sleep this year, so she wanders off to nap in an unused conference room every four hours. Nobody says a word. Apparently nobody keeps an eye on them, which of course means that the surveillance is far more subtle. (Worries him. Snakes aren't subtle. But *this* snake isn't stupid, so he has to assume they're being watched: cameras, keyloggers, audio bugs. Eyes on him constantly. Makes the skin on the back of his neck stand up.) He hasn't seen Rickowski since the first day he was here. Hasn't heard from him, either. For all he knows, in another week or so somebody's going to ask him why he hasn't been filing regular reports.

Last one out, most days. They all work twelve, fourteen hours; he does sixteen as a matter of course. If he's in the office, he's not in the snake's bed. Snake can't bitch at him for working so late when it's to the snake's advantage. He's writing kilolines of code, project after project, attempt after attempt. To anyone observing, to anyone following along, it looks like he's taking wild leap after wild leap at the system he's chosen as his own particular target, windup and let fly, crushed when it doesn't work. Back up, start again. Toss some ideas around the team, careful not to choose any one partner more than others. Careful to bitch in the irc channel no more or no less than any of the others. (Although he's elected the unanimous king of the your-mom joke pretty quickly.)

He knows he's being watched. And he knows it's not just surveillance. The kids on his team all have a basic level of competence, but Caciirelli's not in the same league as the rest. Has to be some reason the guy gets kept around, and the more he watches the guy, the more he's convinced the creepy-crawly feeling he gets around him isn't paranoia, it's some subtle cues his subconscious has put together. Everything about the guy screams *snake*.

Makes him nervous. Fucking *hell* nervous, because he's been adding up the number of people who trip his ersatz snake-radar, and he does *not* like the numbers he's coming up with. It's not urgent enough to use up one of the drop-boxes that will get intel back to O'Neill's hands, especially since they could only set up three, and he doesn't have *proof* yet. But he's keeping notes. Mental ones. Can't write anything down. Can't look too closely. Can't seem too interested. Have to pretend to be exactly what the snake thinks he is: frustrated hacker, angry young/old man, resentful, annoyed. Chafing at the bit to *accomplish* something. Committed. (Trustworthy.)

Anyone watching him (Caciirelli, whoever's got the job of monitoring his network ID and his keylogged activity, the snake) will see him trying at a target, over and over again, and *almost* succeeding. He should get a fucking medal. Because it's always tough as fuck to fail *plausibly* when you already know what's going to succeed. And it'd be too suspicious if he walked straight in and broke things immediately. (Can't take too long, either. Balancing act. Another one.)

He didn't pick the SGC to start with; he's banging on Area 51's system. Had good reasons to start there, ones he could share with the snake and make plausible. The SGC is probably the most secure computer system on the planet. (*Most* secure, not *completely* secure -- like the man once said, the only secure system is one that's powered off, sealed in concrete, and dropped to the bottom of the ocean in a lead-lined safe, and even then someone really determined would find a way in -- but there's a lot of value in that "most".) Groom Lake has more people, fewer military, a greater overlap between the walled-off garden and the Internet at large. (At the SGC, you have to leap through six different hoops to even *access* the Internet on a machine that can also access the internal network; the geeks had bitched for *years* about that.) Get a lever in at Area 51, there's a good chance you can follow it back; compromise the account of someone who timeshares, Groom Lake and the SGC, and you have the place to stand to move the world.

The snake bought it. His team thinks he's brilliant. He's got a thousand bucks on the line with Virta: whichever one of them can start reading Landry's mail first wins it.

He's not worried about having to pay up. Because building a plausible hole to exploit -- something hidden, something hard-to-find, something that requires a flash of genius and a hell of a lot of hard work to figure out -- was Carter's part of this op. And Carter's damn fucking good at what she does. When he finally cracks it, when he finally gets in, it won't be for real; it'll be plausible snake-bait, a honeypot containing only the things they want the snake to know.

He's saving it for when he thinks the snake is *just* ready to finally believe him.

\*

Downtown Seattle. Judicious Cover Management Supposes Unrelenting Perseverance; he still hasn't relaxed his vigilance. He thinks he's managed to make the second tail the snake's got on him, could slip both of them whenever he wanted. He's pretty sure it wouldn't bother to use *three*, but pretty sure isn't positive, and he's not ready to risk it. He's been building a reputation for not rattling the bars of the cage. Too much.

It grates at him. He isn't learning anything. Nothing worth reporting, at least; so far the sum total of his knowledge is scattered

handfuls of unconnected fact, any of which could probably be deduced from the outside. Nothing that justifies using up one of the one-time contact channels. Those are reserved for things where the reward of the information being passed outweighs the risk of the snake catching him using it. They only had time to set up three dead-letter drop-boxes, but at least they're *good* ones this time, ones that won't look suspicious if he uses them, ones he can get to without compromising his persona. He still doesn't want to use them until he has to, and particularly not this early, because he'd have to be insane to send something in plaintext and he hasn't figured out, yet, how to steal enough time unobserved to do the encryption. He's pretty sure he's being constantly watched. Snake probably has entire *divisions* of people, just waiting for him to fuck up.

Once upon a time, back in the days when he was doing HUMINT on loan to the Boys Who Have No Name, the limiting factor on the number of contacts he could have made would have been the number of one-time pads he could memorize, to encrypt those messages. Shouldn't carry a pad with him openly; both the *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti* and the *Sluzba Bezpieczenstwa* knew to look for them, no matter how small you managed to etch them, and getting caught with a sheet of random-noise letter-groups meant getting put on the fast track for disappearance. But there's a trick to it. Get the right kind of receptive-memory state, sing them to yourself in groups of five, each pad mentally tagged to a different tune, and you can get the absolute and perfect recall you need. Some people can do it. Some people can't. He'd always been more reliable at it than most.

He's memorized three one-time pads for this op, one per drop-box, a thousand characters each. Fucking bitch to do; he's out of practice, but all those tricks the monks taught him for hacking the inside of his own head have all kinds of interesting uses. You can pack a lot of information into a thousand characters, if you also set up (and memorize) code-groups for situations you think are likely to turn up, and *this* op has a better vocabulary (without having to resort to code-books) than some he's been on, since he and O'Neill share the type of memory where old code-books go to die; he can still recite the ones for Poland, forwards, backwards, sideways. (VIRT means "mission achieved, requesting pickup". CUMY means "initial run aborted, attempting backup plan". Yadda.) But you also can't re-use the cipher keytext, not without certain exposure; that's why they call them *one-time* pads. Cryptanalysis is better than it used to be, back in the bad old days: one slip and you're pulling down your pants and begging to be fucked. (Ha. Ha.)

Cryptography is better than it used to be, too; there are a double dozen ciphers he could be using, theoretically unbreakable under the limits of current computing power. But they all have one dual critical weakness, and it's the same weakness all modern crypto systems have: they require a fucking ridiculous key length (which is not the problem -- a 1024-bit RSA key will be reasonably secure against brute-force for at least a *few* more years, a 2048-bit key even longer; a 4096-bit key will probably be good until long after he's dead and buried, and if you can memorize a one-time pad, you can memorize an RSA key) and they require a computer to do the enciphering.

Second part's the dealbreaker. Rijndael, Serpent, Blowfish, Twofish (*red fish, blue fish*) -- you can't do them in your head, or with pencil and paper, the way you can do the simple XOR encipher of the good ol' days. And he will be fucked (yeah, just take the sarcasm as a given) if he's stupid enough to believe that Ba'al or its people aren't looking over his metaphorical shoulder for every bit of computer use: keylogging, server-log monitoring, Van Eck phreaking, hell, shoulder surfing even.

But he's not the only person who's had this problem. And irony of ironies, it wasn't at the behest of the Boys In The Three Letter Agencies that it was solved; a science fiction author who needed a plot point called up the best mind in the business, and nowadays all you need to generate your keystream and encrypt your text is a deck of goddamn playing cards and a mutually-agreed-upon starting layout (memorized; he's got dozens).

*Power to the fucking people, right on, yeah.*

And you can re-use drop boxes, where you can't re-use one-time pads -- if you have to, if it's crucial -- but he doesn't know how long he's going to be here, and he doesn't want to, *can't*, risk blowing his contact's cover. He doesn't know which one of the baristas at the coffee shop is the one O'Neill planted; what he doesn't know, he can't give away, in the face of torture or a snake in his head. (Not that he thinks Ba'al would have a problem causing the entire staff to disappear, but hey.) He doesn't know how the guy (or girl) gets information back to O'Neill. Doesn't know how O'Neill found him (her), or why O'Neill is willing to trust him. Doesn't need to know. But they're on high alert and full paranoia, and that means he can't take the risks he would otherwise normally be willing to take: no direct handoffs, no slipping a folded-up and enciphered message into the tip jar, no face-to-face meets with a courier like the courier he used to be.

He's out on the edge of a very long line, and he can't see who's standing at the other end of it. It's not the first time he's been deep under. But it's the first time he's been so deep for such high stakes. It's the kind of operation where being able to hear a friendly voice on the other end of a line would mean so much. It's also the kind of op where he can't risk it. Not once. The only comfort he has, cold comfort indeed, is that O'Neill's watching for him. Not overtly; that would raise too much suspicion. But watching for his influence, watching for the ripples his actions are making. He's not as alone as it feels. O'Neill. Carter. Barrett, at the NID. By now, *someone* will have gotten word back to --

*Don't think about Mitchell.*

So: up to the marina, back down again, dodging human obstacles the whole way (Jackass Conduct Might Stop Ubiquitous Pedestrians); the rain doesn't keep the locals off the streets any more than it does him. In for coffee (second number odd). He's left little puddles halfway up the stairs (he still runs them, every morning, and he doesn't give a shit about the looks he gets) when the phone buzzes to life in his back pocket. Too much to hope to get through one morning without a message from On High. "You're early this morning, Jack," the snake says.

He's pretty sure the snake thinks that calling him Jack gets on his nerves. He hasn't done anything to disabuse it of the notion; it might come in useful later. "Yeah, funny thing," he snaps. "Something kept me up all night; it just wasn't worth trying to sleep."

"Tsk. You're a growing boy; you need your rest." It's not quite mockery. Not *quite*. Teasing, almost. "There's nothing saying you have to be here first thing in the morning, you know."

The moments when the snake acts human are the moments that creep him out the worst. "Yeah, yeah," he says, rounding the corner of the stairwell, trying not to let his breathing give away the amount of energy he's expending. "If I wasn't, who'd bring you your fucking coffee?"

"Perhaps you have a point," the snake concedes. "I'll see you in a few moments."

Click.

Nothing useful to send back up the chain yet. Bits and pieces. Nothing more. A few names, a few facts, a few figures. He hasn't been able to piece together anything on the snake's motives, goals, plans. He doesn't even fucking know how many fucking snakes are in the building.

All he can do is hope that the snake finds him useful as something other than an errand-boy and fucktoy, or else his grace period isn't as long as it's going to need to be.

Up-up-up the stairs, latte in one hand, cappuccino in the other: one-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-nine-ten-eleven-twelve stairs and turn, again and again. Keycard reader at the top floor. His card will get him anywhere above-ground, which means there's nothing interesting above-ground. In this building, at least. He hasn't gone exploring yet.

So much of this is about positioning: the snake extending tiny feelers of apparent trust, waiting to see what he'll do with them. Waiting to see if he'll grab the reins and run. Layers upon layers. Tests within tests. Circles within circles.

If he were here as a double agent, as a spy, he'd be trying to gain information: trying to explore, trying to find out something to report, trying to exceed the access he's been given or use the access he's been given to find something worth reporting. (Of course, he *is* here as a double agent. But not a *stupid* one.) So he can't go looking. But if he were here as a *smart* double agent, he'd know that the snake would be expecting a double agent to gather intel, over-compensate to avoid being spotted, not display the basic level of curiosity any person would display. So he can't *not* go looking, either. Either way is suspicious. Just a question of how suspicious he wants to be. And in which direction.

*(Shall we play a game? How about Global Thermonuclear War. Wouldn't you prefer a good game of chess?)*

\*

For once he's not the first person in. He's taken to leaving a change of clothes at the office, for the days he gets rainsoaked on his morning run; by the time he gets changed, Virta and Chen are both at their desks, wearing headphones. (Heavy metal for Virta, bubblegum K-pop for Chen.) From the state of the cube pods, they've probably been there all night; the cleaning crew only touches the place if it's deserted, and there are empty cans of Jolt and Red Bull and Diet Dew everywhere. (Code monkey like Fritos; code monkey like Tab and Mountain Dew. Code monkey think maybe manager want to take over goddamn Earth himself.)

Virta's frowning at a screen full of code, tapping his thumb to page-down (in what's probably the rhythm of whatever he's listening to) so quickly that it means he's not actually reading it, just skimming in hopes that a keyword will jump out at him. (Virta has a pathological aversion to using `grep`; he says it annoys him.) Chen's not doing anything, just fapping around on Russian-language cracker message boards. (He doesn't sweat it. He's technically in charge of the team, and he's pretty sure he's supposed to be cracking the whip to get results, but a) he knows that trying to micromanage a hacker is like trying to teach a cat how to do tricks; b) the team works sixty-hour weeks minimum, he's not going to begrudge them a little bit of downtime to clear their heads if a problem is being particularly stubborn; c) *he* doesn't exactly plan to give up his habit of reading Slashdot and his morning blogroll over coffee, either.)

He doesn't say anything to either of them, just sits down at his desk. Headphones mean 'don't bug me': either the wearer doesn't want to interact with another human being, or they're deep in the middle of a problem and verbal input will crash their concentration field. Headphones mean communication via email, irc, or internal Jabber server only. (He isn't of the generation that natively learned to treat voice as a priority interrupt while text goes on the stack, but he sure as hell figured out the value of that hacker communication style fast enough. He looked up the studies, once. Some bright scientists did brain scans. Deep hack mode produces a brain-wave pattern that takes twenty minutes to achieve; an interrupt can fuck your whole morning.)

So he pulls up his keyboard. Logs into the computer. Twenty-five character password. Looks like line noise. And God help you if you use the secure server for surfing or webmail or even mp3s. The corporate network and Subversion servers don't even have a gateway to the Internet; getting stuff in or out requires a manager's permission and the deployment of the good old-fashioned sneakernet (no matter how high-latency it is). Or it does here, at least; the rules are probably different when you're not on the snake's Christmas-card list.

He's got his morning routine down to a science. Two desktops to log onto. On one, his `.gnomerc` launches Firefox, Thunderbird, and xmms; on the other, the secure server, it launches BitchX and Psi, and reattaches his `screen` session containing screen after screen of code. Doesn't take him long to scan through his email, dismiss everything as unimportant. He's just finishing up the morning blog crawl (eBay's barring listings for MMORPG property, Rupert Murdoch's fucking goons have somehow managed to get SecLists.org's mailing list archives pulled offline by abusing the DMCA again, and oh, look, Microsoft is *already* working on the first service pack for Vista, an operating system that's not even out the door yet) when movement in the corner irc window catches his eye:

```
<@azimov> hey nielson, before you get too busy
<@azimov> lan party tonight
<@azimov> cybergate, 9pm
<@azimov> playing unreal tournament
<@azimov> you in?
```

He glances over at Virta. Nothing but the back of Virta's head. He hasn't gone out of his way to be too sociable, but he hasn't gone out of his way to push people aside, either, and Virta's perpetually genial, always willing to extend a hand. Can't trust the guy further than he could throw him, but at least he's a human voice. It's something.

```
<@jdn> can't
<@jdn> got plans with the boss, can't make it tonight
<@azimov> man
<@azimov> he's got you on a short leash
<@jdn> yeah, he bought me in the slave markets of iskanderun
<@jdn> i pine for the day when i can make my escape
```

As soon as he hits enter and the words appear in their irc channel, Virta snorts, on the other side of the cubicle. "Yeah, right," Virta says. "You're fucking him, aren't you."

Virta sounds unimpressed. Doesn't much care, one way or the other; wants to know because information is his stock in trade, not because of any particular need to judge. Virta just likes knowing what's going on around him.

Only a second to figure out how to play it. By the time his brain catches up, he's already finding himself grinning, wide and bright. "He's fucking me," he says. "Every damn night. Best I ever had. You only wish you could get a piece of this."

The lies burn his lips, but he lets them pass. Somebody's listening. Gotta be. He has to show them he's willing to play ball.

\*

The snake bends him over the back of the chair, face-down. One hand on the back of his neck. One hand on his hip. Just enough leeway to break the hold. If he wanted to. He wants to. Can't. The space is an offering: test, trust. *What would it take for you to fight me?*

*More than this. We're just getting started.*

"It's so comforting to know you enjoyed my hospitality enough to want to come back to it," the snake is purring at him. Slime, slithering in one ear, out the other. He almost expects the room to tilt, any minute now, walls becoming floors becoming ceiling becoming walls.

He hisses. Pushes into the touch. (*Makes himself.*) *If you can keep your head while those about you --* "I want what you have," he says. Snarls. "I'm using you. You know I am. If your price for letting me use you is you using me in return, I'll suck it up and deal. At least I'm getting laid out of the bargain."

The snake runs a hand over his ass. Nice ass. Mitchell keeps telling him --

*Don't think about Mitchell.*

"I keep forgetting, you prefer men now," the snake says, soft and deadly. "Or is that something you always carried, hidden?"

He makes himself laugh. Half the time they're doing this, the snake keeps pushing him to talk about O'Neill. Wants to know how much of O'Neill is left in him. It's almost like the snake wants to play with an old familiar toy, the one that got away, the one it couldn't quite ever manage to conquer. He encourages the impression. He has to. It's his best defense. Gambling everything on the snake's sense of unfinished business: *first* you break him, *then* you snake him.

He's planning on being long gone by the time the snake realizes he's never going to break. Until then, he's going to have to keep walking the tightrope. Enough cooperation to be useful, enough lip to be a challenge. Every capitulation *here* prompts rebellion *there*. Give a little, take a little. A mutually beneficial relationship. Together they're the evil Tok'ra. (*Ha. Ha.*)

So he reaches for the right balance between pulling away and leaning in, playing revolted and needy all at once. "You wanna fuck me, fuck me," he snarls. "If you want to play around with a conversation about *feelings*, I have work to fucking do."

"My dear Jack," the snake says. "Haven't you realized that everything's a game?"

He has. That's the problem.

*Smile for the audience.*

\*

Downtown Seattle: Jack Can't Mess Snakes Up Personally, so today he's running along the Sound, right on the other side of Alaskan Way, full-out on the railroad tracks. Grey and misty today, but it isn't actually raining yet, even though it looks like it might start any minute.

Four-minute mile. Three-fifty-five. Three-fifty. He pushes it, harder, harder. Hurts like hell, but he puts the pain elsewhere. He's getting used to shoving things back into the depths of his head again; some skills just need dusting-off.

Snake yanks his chain when he gets to Pier 90. Ring, ring, Avon calling, and he drops down to a jog instead of the full-out push he's been pushing. "Jack," Ba'al whispers in his earpiece. "We've talked about why you shouldn't try to lose your bodyguards."

He's proud that his voice doesn't sound like he's been running. This body's good for something after all. "Wasn't trying. They lost me. Seems like you need some better henchmen there, Skippy."

"Are you applying for the job?" Smug. Amused. Ba'al lets itself banter more often during these morning chats. He thinks it might be the time when Balim is closest to the surface, the persona the snake plays for observers and cameras and all the people who don't know the real deal. He gets how the role could become so comfortable as to shine through even when the snake's not trying; his own personal sense of self-identity is hard-won, but he's even caught himself slipping. Daniel could probably get a paper out of it: long-term undercover operatives, language-use patterns and self-identity, for the use of. Longer you play the role, the more you come to believe in it. Longer you pretend for everyone else, the more you start to pretend for yourself.

He'll have to watch that.

"You offering?" he counters.

Ba'al laughs again. "If I thought you'd accept, I might," it says. "Don't forget my cappuccino."

Click.

He doubles back. Cuts across the railroad tracks again. After a minute, he can just pick out the unmarked black car, pacing him slowly down Elliott, ignoring the horns blaring behind. He resists the temptation to blow them a kiss. No love lost there. They're loyal to Ba'al *and* Balim: to the snake and the role the snake is playing. No allies behind the Naquadah Curtain this time. He hasn't even tried to strike up a conversation with them; they aren't going to be on his side.

At one point Mitchell (*don't think about Mitchell*) had called this a game of chess, but chess is simple: attacker, defender. This is more muddied. The players aren't clear, and neither are the alliances. Ba'al/Balim. Farrow-Marshall. The SGC. Homeworld. The IOA. The Trust. The NID. And that's just *here*; God only knows what's going on in the galaxy at large. (O'Neill briefed him from top to bottom before he came, but briefings are shallow, pale imitations of being there to know it for yourself. He doesn't let himself hope that his lack of knowledge isn't going to fuck him over in the end, because the minute you have to start using words like 'hope', you've already lost.) And the playing field's fractal; pick an enemy, any enemy, and look at them in isolation: the same struggle they're all fighting out as a whole is duplicated internally. Zoom in, zoom out. Doesn't matter. Everyone's in bed with someone and fucking over someone else.

Except for him. He doesn't answer to anybody but himself; nobody's pulling his strings. He might be allied with O'Neill, but O'Neill doesn't control all of him, no matter how much O'Neill might think he does. (Doesn't plan on enlightening him, either. Best to hold some things until you need them. Save your pocket cards until after they make or break you on the river.)

So. Not chess. Risk, maybe; shifting alliances, half-hidden in the darkness, webs of trust and betrayal, hundreds of possible strategies. And he's stuck in a land war in Asia with someone else holding all the cards, but it's okay, because for an Air Force boy, he's always been better at boots on the ground than he has any right to be. One man can do what an army can't; he learned that a long time ago, in those missing years, back in all the places O'Neill doesn't think about anymore.

To win this, he has to play the game smarter than anyone else is. Not just once; constantly. One mistake and he's dead or worse, and the snake wins. Slip too far in one direction or another and it's *vivat serpentis*, amen.

Time to step it up.

Coffee shop's got a peppermint mocha on special this morning. He orders their largest size; the sleep deprivation is starting to take its toll on him. Folds up a dollar, drops it in the tip jar. (Second number odd.) Grabs Ba'al's cappuccino and his mocha and saunters out to the curb; kicks the quarter-panel of the car that's idling there. First time he's acknowledged its existence.

"Hey," he says, when the oversized man (Jaffa) in black t-shirt, black jeans, black sunglasses rolls down the window, looking surprised. "You guys might as well give me a lift. I think I'm getting a blister."

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ii. february

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*i am a fugitive on the run; i carry the weight of what I've done  
(you can't change the world, but you can change what's to come)  
-- Bush*

---

deemed it prudent to begin establishing myself as anxious to assist in fashions other than technical, pointing to my established lack of progress in penetrating the system i had chosen to attack. by that time, i had already come to the conclusion that the team of intrusion specialists i was directing would be capable of achieving the desired results on their own, given sufficient time and motivation.

unsurprisingly, ba'al was initially hesitant to provide me with any access beyond that which i had already been given. despite this mistrust, i reminded him that i was possessed of a number of skills that might prove useful, playing upon his fascination with my previous identity and establishing myself as a less principled version of same. while it remained difficult to strike the correct balance between willing to cooperate and true to ba'al's experience of my previous self, i remained determined to present the picture of an individual who was restless with the tasks he had been given and interested in fieldwork to further ba'al's goals and the goals of fmi, to the extent that those goals had been explained to me.

through multiple attempts to persuade ba'al that my talents were being wasted in the role i had been assigned, and due to my established willingness to cooperate with directions i had been given and tasks i had been assigned, i succeeded, by mid-february, in being in the right place at the right time to be

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The snake leans over him. Pushing him down, into the bed, against the covers, and he can see six ways to break free and five of them would leave a human dead before he finished moving.

Instead he smiles. Snarls. Same difference. Snake sees both of them, anyway. He tips his hips up, wraps his hand around the snake-host-body's shoulder. Nice body. If it weren't for what's inside, it might even be possible for him to be attracted to it.

He's not. But he's started to do a damn good impression of it. He thinks the snake might even be buying it.

He'd known, walking into this, what he was going to have to do. Known what Ba'al was likely to want from him. Part of why it had taken him so long to be ready for it. O'Neill had known too. They have the same memories, the same sense-impressions, the same shared secrets. Nobody else knows. Daniel had never been there to watch: some last lingering mortal squeamishness, some desire to give him privacy even when he was begging for company. (Daniel had never been there at all. Hallucination. That's all it was. If it had been Daniel, Daniel would have made it stop.)

He hadn't told anybody, afterwards. He's the only one who knows. He'd never told anyone: not Fraiser, not MacKenzie, not Daniel after they'd gotten him back. Lock it up, behind his eyes. Write-only memory. Until he'd tattooed the patterns underneath his skin, and Mitchell had asked --

*Don't think about Mitchell.* Not here, not now, not while the snake's around him, inside of him. Touching him. Mitchell knew what he was going to have to do, too. Says it won't make a difference when he comes back. But Mitchell's an idealist underneath those cynic's clothes. One of the reasons why he loves the man so deeply, because he was an idealist too, years and years ago, before he got burned one too many times. It's good for him to remember there's idealism still out there. They'll deal with it. Later. Somehow. Once he gets back. He's not going to hide what he's done this time, what's been done to him. Mitchell will stand.

(Would Daniel have?)

Enough. Fuck, he's slipping again. Sit *shikantaza* in the shower later; dig his fingers into the snake's hips and pull it close now. Expose his throat. Show his belly. Listen to the noises he's making, the snake's making. He's always half-wondered (sick fascination, turning over a rock, watching the worms squirm back into the dark) how much the snakes really *wanted* human bodies, except as flesh-puppet incubators to walk around in. Now he knows the answer. For this one, at least.

He lets his mind go elsewhere. Body'll take care of itself. The snake will take care of it; it likes when he comes. Gets off on making him get off, likes the shadow-play of self-loathing he always pretends to afterward. Part of their game. Sex, the ultimate power trip. Doesn't actually touch him. It's his body, and he's shared it with some and offered it to others and dangled it just out of reach of even more, but there's only one person who gets to own it (other than himself) and *he* doesn't want ownership. Just time-share. So everything else he does with his body doesn't matter now; it'll all wash straight down the drain. All he has to do is remember to make it look good.

The snake puts a hand over his mouth when it's done. Puts its mouth against the other side of its hand. Close, so close; he can see the ring of naquadah-buildup around the host-body's pupils. He holds himself still. *Makes* himself hold still. Familiar, too familiar; his pulse is high and thready, fluttering under his skin.

"I could snap your neck," Ba'al says. Naked flesh against naked flesh. Naked threat.

"You won't," he says, his lips brushing against its palm, grotesque parody of a kiss. "Not until you get a chance to see how useful I can really be."

Ba'al's thumb presses against his carotid. Not quite enough to knock him out. Enough to make the edges of his vision go grey and fuzzy, black spots swimming before his eyes in the low light of his ugly bedroom. Oh-so-carefully calculated; he knows the snake can gauge the time he has, down to the last second. "I haven't seen much evidence of your usefulness thus far."

He holds to consciousness, red in tooth and claw. "Haven't let me show you."

If it weren't for the snake's hand, over his mouth, they'd be kissing. That's one thing the snake hasn't done to him so far. Maybe to them, it means something else. He remembers hearing of Jacob, Selmak, a Tok'ra tunnel. Shudders. Turns it into a stretch, a ripple of the spine, pressing up against the snake's body. *I'm not frightened. Not of you.*

The snake's smirk says it knows his posturing to be a lie. "I could give you to one of my children, then, instead," it says. "That would allow you to be useful indeed."

His blood is ringing in his ears, the crash and hiss of surf striking rock. Seconds until he greys out. Ten, nine, eight. "They'd fight you," he says. Tries not to sound frightened; tries not to sound smug. Either way would be too far. Gotta play it just right. "I don't."

"Point," Ba'al says. It opens its hand, and he does not allow himself to gasp for air. "We shall see how long that will keep saving you."

\*

"Well, *you* look like something the cat dragged in," Virta says, watching him drop into his chair with coffee in hand. "Boss keeping you up all night?"

So not in the mood. "Fuck off," he mutters, pulling up a login window. "Just not sleeping, is all."

Too tired to make a good show of it, for Virta or for the rest of them or for Caciirelli-the-goddamn-snake, who is watching him over the cube wall with vague and distant interest. He pulls his headphones out of his drawer as soon as he sits down. Headphones mean "don't talk to me". Headphones mean "fuck off". Even if you're not playing music through them, and right now the last thing he wants is more auditory input at all. Of any kind. Right now all he wants is a gallon of coffee. Or a goddamnap. Hell, he'll take both; the amount of sleep he's *not* getting would let him crash for twenty-four straight even *with* a gallon of coffee floating around in his veins.

If he could find someplace he felt safe enough to sleep. Even when the snake's not in the room, his hardwired sentries know he's in danger. He wakes up every twenty. He's been praying it doesn't show on the infrared cameras he knows damn well the snake has planted in his bedroom. Or if it does, he's hoping it looks like bad dreams. He's got enough excuses for a few nightmares locked up

inside his skull.

Virta's apparently decided to ignore the universal geek shorthand, though. The kid gets up, stands next to the desk, kicks the chair. Cranes his neck. Doesn't even have the fucking manners to pretend he's not shoulder-surfing. "Hey, come on. Coffee in the breakroom tastes like shit this morning, I think the cleaning people forgot to rinse the soap out of the pot. Come show me where the fuck you get yours. I could use some fresh air this morning."

It's the last thing he wants to do right now. But Virta's looking at him, hopeful like a puppy, and he can't bring himself to kick the kid. "Fine," he snarls. "Whatever. Let me just call over."

Virta doesn't say anything, just watches him pull the cell phone out of his back pocket and dial. He's got Ba'al's private line. The one that rings through to its desk without going through Esmeralda the Wonder Secretary. Ba'al answers on the third ring, no pretense of playing human this time. "What?" it snaps.

"Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war," he sing-songs. (Look sharp. Play nice.) "Heading out for a field trip. Call up the minders."

The snake sounds *pissed* at something, and he wonders what's wrong. It hadn't sounded anywhere near this cranky half an hour ago when it had called him back from his run. "I presume you're a big enough boy to wipe your own ass. Stop bothering me with this shit."

Click.

It's like living with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Snake. Virta's biting his lip as he disconnects his end of the call, shoves the phone back in the back pocket of his jeans. He doesn't say anything to the kid, just grabs his windbreaker. In deference to the fact that people who aren't him don't like running up and down dozens of flights of stairs, they take the elevator. Virta's still quiet on the way down.

"Cat got your tongue?" he asks the kid, as they flash their IDs to the security guard, clear through the scanners, and make it out, squinting, onto the street. (Sun's out today, first time in weeks. Hallelujah, it's a miracle.)

Whatever he was expecting, this isn't it. The minute they're clear of the invisible radius around the lobby, Virta says. "Look, I'm worried about you. Tell me you're not in any trouble."

Christ on a crutch. His head fucking hurts. "I'm not in any trouble."

"Yeah, you know," Virta says. "I've got a hard time believing that. This gig pays well enough, but it's not worth killing yourself over. If you're in trouble, I could find you something somewhere else. Hell, if Balim's got some kind of weird hold over you, I'm pretty sure Chen could find you something in China. Or Suzukimo still has contacts over in Tokyo. And I *know* you're good enough to set yourself up a whole new identity that Balim couldn't trace."

He closes his eyes for a fraction of a second. Runs into someone coming in the other direction -- bad idea to stop dead on the downtown streets -- but he doesn't bother to apologize. "Stop talking," he says. "Just ... stop talking."

Virta stops walking instead. Grabs his elbow. The other pedestrians route around them, grumbling the whole way. "No," he says. "No. I mean, you're like the fucking Night of the Living Dead, okay? Let me help."

He pulls his elbow out of Virta's grip. "Nothing to help with," he says. Then sighs, because the kid's trying. Got a good heart, underneath all of the posturing and preening. "I'm serious, okay? I'm just bored and pissed because I'm spinning my fucking wheels with this project. So I couldn't sleep, and I got up at like two in the morning and amused myself by running every single attachment I had in my spam folder to see how long it took my sandbox machine to catch a copy of every single virus or Trojan I could think of. Better than counting sheep."

It's actually not even a lie -- the team's got a contest running this month to see who can design their own worm that will go the furthest, and he's been capturing as much code as he can to decompile it and study it, since he's starting at a disadvantage; they've all got plenty more practice than he does. And if he's not going to be sleeping, at least he can get something *useful* accomplished. Still, must have been the right thing to say, because Virta laughs and looks a little less worried.

"Hardcore nerd, man," Virta mutters, shaking his head. "I thought *I* was bad."

"You are," he says, fumbling for the threads of their usual easy banter. "I don't sleep with my Ubuntu install disks as a teddy bear."

The last of the concern passes, and Virta's laughing. "Yeah, well, at least I sleep. You want me to lend you the security blanket, dude? I can smuggle it in under my jacket so nobody notices."

Air's cold, but the sunshine's warm on the side of his face. "You could lend me your mom," he counters. "Come on. You dragged me out here, you're buying."

\*

Downtown Seattle. Judicial Confederates Manipulate Soldiers' Underlying Problems; their little heart-to-heart means Virta's decided he wants to be *friends*, and it's getting harder to come up with excuses that *won't* leave the kid thinking he's some kind of battered boyfriend. He settles for moving his half-hour in the gym from in the mornings before his run to the afternoon, halfway between lunch break and dinnertime, and invites the rest of the team to join him down in the headquarters' gym. (Nicer than any health club he's seen in a while. Farrow-Marshall apparently believes in employee fitness.)

He frames it as a team bonding thing: weight lifting, a little bit of boxing, some light hand-to-hand. Cacielli declines (unsurprising; a snake would have to work three times as hard to appear human; it is harder to appear less skilled at something than you actually are than it is to appear more skilled than you are). Chen and Suzukimo drop in and out, here and there. (Suzukimo turns out to be capable of nearly *kicking his fucking ass* in hand-to-hand half the time; it makes him wonder if he identified the wrong person as the snake, but no, she can barely bench fifty pounds without slipping. She's just fucking fast, with some kind of previous training, and she's got no problems fighting dirty.)

Most afternoons it's just him and Virta, bonding over the free weights. They talk about movies, or work projects, or various shit that's happening in the security (and security-breaking) world. Virta's not bad. Not great, either. They've set a goal of getting Virta up to lifting a hundred by the end of winter. It's soothing, having another human being there to shoot the shit with while he's lifting or beating the shit out of the bag. A human body, close enough to touch sometimes. Virta smells nice, too.

Still, as nice as it is to have someone in his space who isn't trying to get into his pants, it cuts his solitary time, his thinking-time,

down even further. Now he's just got his morning run left.

The only bright spot is that the snake's stopped yanking his reins so quickly. First couple of weeks, he hadn't been able to complete a single 10K; now he's regularly hitting his goal of fifteen. Gives him time to strategize. To think things over. To plan.

Today he's running up Madison (grey and dingy outside, grey skies, grey buildings, grey puddles and pavement and water, but the clouds aren't doing much more than spitting) and thinking about positioning. About how to get the snake to give him something to do that will let him start piecing together more educated guesses about the snake's plans. What it has him doing now is the equivalent of work-for-hire, something you can give someone and be reasonably certain they won't be able to piece together your Secret Master Plan from it. (Of course, your *smart* Evil Overlord will construct the Secret Master Plan in such a way as to make sure that no one person can ever assemble enough of the pieces to put together the whole. He's been counting on the notion that snakes aren't smart. If this assumption proves false, he's going to have a hell of a lot of extra work to accomplish.) He has to come up with some way to get the snake to offer him a minor conditional test of trust, something that will let the snake have more confidence in his motivations.

Problem is that he has to come up with some way to get the snake to offer him a conditional test of trust without clueing the snake in to what he's doing, because the people you trust the least are the people who say "what can I do to make you trust me" the loudest.

He knows, from seven years of Daniel's briefings, what Goa'uld society is like. A bunch of minor lordlings, all paying lip service to their chosen more powerful overlord, all of them scheming and plotting ways to backstab and manipulate their way into the top role themselves. A System Lord doesn't trust easily. A System Lord doesn't trust at all, not in the ways humans understand 'trust'.

(A memory:

*Him. Daniel. Daniel's office, where they'd retreated, rather than facing the crowds in the commissary. There is no word in the Goa'uld language for 'trust', you know. Daniel's eyes, wide and round behind the lenses of his glasses. The closest you can get is 'temporary alliance'. And it's always got the connotation that you're just waiting for the person to sell you out...*

*An apple, sitting on the tray. There's a spot on the side, a dimpled flaw that had been carefully hidden on the cafeteria line. He hadn't noticed it until he brought it back with him. The smell of dust, which Daniel's office always collects, despite Daniel's best efforts and the combined forces of the cleaning crews. The haphazard stack of books that Daniel's sweeping hand gestures nearly knock over. The press of Daniel's knees, warm and solid, against his own where they bump beneath the work-bench they're using as a lunch-table.*

You're not listening to me, Jack.

I never listen to you when you go into lecture mode, Daniel.

*It's amazing the details the human mind retains.)*

He knows enough about Goa'uld society to know that there are about fifteen different ways he could present himself to the snake so the snake would treat him like a petty Goa'uld lordling looking for that temporary alliance. He knows every last piece of the body language he'd need to use, the manner of speech he'd need to adopt, to speak to the section of the snake's instincts governing social strata and power plays. He knows how he could make the snake's subconscious think of him as an under-Goa'uld even while the snake's conscious mind knew him to be human, just enough so that he could draw on those societally-programmed roles.

(It's his knowledge, dammit. *His*. Acquired from briefing and observation and all those conversations with Daniel that Daniel always thought he was sleeping through. Kanan left him nothing. Nothing. He wouldn't have even known Kanan's name if it hadn't been dragged out of him.)

Getting the snake to think of him as an underling isn't the way to go, though. It would open some doors, but it would shut others, always and forever. And those are the doors he's going to have to walk through eventually. An under-Goa'uld is never trusted, never fully briefed, never brought into the fold. A System Lord is always watching for the inevitable betrayal. He can't afford that. He has to get the snake thinking of him not as a temporary ally, but as an unhopd-for pair of hands. Trusted lieutenant. Assistant. *Confidante*.

He'd asked Teal'c. On the back porch of --

(Stubbing his mental toe, drawing back quickly; it's also amazing how many tendrils and runners creep through the consciousness, roots waiting to rise in the darkness for the unwary traveler to trip over. *Don't think about Mitchell*.)

He'd asked Teal'c. How much Apophis had confided in his First Prime. How much a *lo'tar* would know about his Goa'uld lord's plans. Answer: not much. He remembers Daniel, coming back from that royal clusterfuck of an undercover mission, disturbed by so many things but mostly disturbed by a conversation he'd had with Ba'al's *lo'tar*, a man willfully complicit in his own slavery. Which one's the truth? He'd decided to take the chance. Other System Lords might not share things with their human underlings, but Ba'al's done it once. They're all gambling on the chance that he can get Ba'al to do it again.

He just doesn't know *how*.

He's moving on autopilot. His mind divided: one part fully inhabiting his body (feet ankles knees hips, head shoulders knees and toes, arms pumping, chest rising falling), one part engaged in circling the problem, round and round again, ashes ashes we all fall down. And he's gotten so used to this time being *his* (damn it) that he's let himself get sloppy, draw inward, lower his watchdogs: one more anonymous face in a sea of anonymous faces, knowing he's being observed from a distance but knowing that he's doing nothing suspicious and therefore not needing to stay on guard. When he hears the snake say "What *do* you see in this?" it takes him three whole seconds to realize that the voice comes, not from the earpiece in his left ear, not from the resonance it makes through his headbones, but from the person running to his right.

When startled, when nervous, step forward. "There're these crazy little things called endorphins," he says, timing his breathing just right so he doesn't have to gasp. (Wouldn't have to anyway. He might be running, not jogging, but he's been doing a hell of a lot of running lately and he's in better shape than he's been in years.) "What's the matter, I forget to charge my cell phone or something?"

The snake is dressed (dear *God*) in gym shorts and a plain white t-shirt, not even darkened at the collar and armpits. Makes him feel overdressed. He runs in the same jeans and t-shirt he wears into the office, used to ignoring the press of damp fabric; he doesn't waste the effort of changing when he gets to the office unless he gets soaked, and sometimes not even then. It's not breathing hard either. Funny thing, that.

"No," it says. Matches his pace perfectly, step for step, stride for stride. Manages to avoid the puddles, too. (Fucker.) "I've

watched you engaging in this little routine every morning since you arrived. I thought I'd join you and see for myself what sort of benefit you got from it."

Fucking *hell*, if the fucking snake decides it wants to come jogging along with him every fucking morning he's going to fucking shoot something really fucking quickly. Like the snake. Or *himself*. "We can't all be the Six Million Dollar Man just by climbing into a box, you know. Some of us have to work at it."

He's expecting some kind of snide reply -- half the time, he thinks the snake actually *enjoys* sniping with him -- but instead, there's silence. For a good half a block. He's beginning to think that maybe the snake isn't in the mood for conversation (which would be *fucking nice*) when the snake says, sounding thoughtful, "You could be, you know."

His heart slam-*thuds* in his chest, and it has nothing at all to do with the exercise. The snake has a sarcophagus. Of *course* the snake has a sarcophagus. And it's offering him a timeshare. He tries to ignore the siren's song of *want-want-want*. (He's kicked heroin and he's kicked sarcophagus-addiction and the fucking heroin was a walk in the fucking park in comparison. Once an addict, always an addict, and even if *this* body hadn't been the body Ba'al's sarcophagus had rebuilt, over and over, the brain still remembers.)

His first impulse is to *get away*. But that wouldn't match the persona he's projecting. And the other thoughts fall after it, like a house of cards tumbling, possibility after possibility all narrowing down to one shrieking suspicion: this is a test.

Everything's a test.

Only got a few seconds to figure out how to play it. Which will make the snake less suspicious: yes or no? He doesn't think he could hold his cover while high on a sarcophagus ride, and he's pretty fucking sure the snake knows what the fucking box does to humans. (Daniel, in robes, his glasses missing. Laughing. *I just need a little more time*.) So he can't say yes. But he's pretty fucking sure the snake *also* knows that he knows that it knows what the fucking box does to humans (*we're a knowledgeable bunch*), so he can't say no, at least not in the wrong way.

Fortunately, the few seconds he takes fall in line with what he decides (quickly, too quickly) what his answer has to be: pause, hesitation. Contemplation. "Fucking hell, that's tempting," he finally says, trying to put as much regret into his voice as he thinks he can get away with. "No idea how it'd work on me, though, thanks to how that goatfucker fucked up when he made me. And you know what that thing does to humans. I wouldn't be much use to you on a permanent sarcophagus high."

"True," the snake agrees. (Too quickly? Too slowly?) It sounds half-regretful. "Pity, that. It would save you so much of this time you waste in physical conditioning."

If it's a test (and everything's a test), he has no idea if he passed or failed. "Gives me a chance to get out and about, at least. I don't do well with being cooped up. Not anymore."

"True," the snake says again. "I suppose that is an advantage."

He bites back anything else he could say, the temptation to snipe. Unbridled free-floating hostility will only take him so far; he's known for a while that sooner or later he'd have to rein in the rage. To the snake, at least. Too suspicious for him to show up all buddy-buddy from the get-go, but keeping that level of venom too long would make him a liability, not an asset. This is as good a time to dial it back as any. So he shuts his mouth and keeps on running, iron control keeping him from picking up the pace. He's not going to outrun the snake, and he'll only kill himself trying.

After a few minutes, it's almost camaraderie, the weave and dance between the crowd of pedestrians that will only keep thickening as the morning ages, the challenge of keeping in perfect step (heel, toe, heel, toe, marching up and down again, and there's no discharge in the war). He's not going to be the one who breaks it, even when they're parted by *this* man with briefcase, *this* woman with stroller. He sneaks a glance over to the snake after one of those interruptions, only to find the snake looking back at him. Smiling. Not a smirk, a *smile*.

Makes him shiver.

He timed it right today; he can feel the burn starting in his calves and the backs of his thighs just as he (they) makes the turn from Madison onto Second. He drops down to a jog, takes the last two blocks as cool-down. Snake paces him, neatly, precise. He pauses outside the door to the coffee shop and drags a hand through his sweat-damp hair. "Last stop," he says. "All ashore what's going ashore."

The snake just smiles (*again*) and gestures at the door. "After you," it says.

He closes his eyes, for just a second longer than a blink. "Fine," he says. "But you're buying your own damn cappuccino today."

"I do believe," the snake says, thoughtfully, "that I buy the coffee every morning. You *are* drawing your allowance from my general fund, after all."

Ha. *Ha*. He's not actually drawing a paycheck; the snake gave him the keys to the slush fund and told him to pull whatever he needed, and they haven't talked money since. He pays for his coffee with a ten he dredges up from the depths of his pocket, takes the handful of bills and change. Drops the change in the tip jar. Straightens each of the bills so they're facing the same way, the five in the back, the three singles in front (eyes flicking to the serial numbers as he does) and puts a mental subroutine in place: if the snake ever sees him handling folding money again, here or elsewhere, he'll have to tidy it in the same fashion so it looks like a perpetual habit. Thank God there's a bill with the serial number he needs in his change, so he can fold it and drop it in the tip cup without having to come up with some excuse to dig in his pockets again.

For a minute when they get back out of the coffee shop, he's expecting the snake to escort him over to the building, dog his steps the entire way. But all it does is smile at him again and raise the coffee cup in salute. "Thank you for allowing me to share your morning run," it says, all full formality. "It has been a most enlightening experience."

Yeah. That's what he's worried about.

He watches it as it saunters away. Fucking thing didn't even break a sweat.

\*

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<@azimov> good morning, fearless leader
<@azimov> you look like shit again
<@azimov> still not sleeping?
<@azimov> HEY
```

<@azimov> NIELSON  
<@azimov> DO NOT MAKE ME RICKROLL THIS ENTIRE FLOOR TO GET YOUR ATTENTION  
<@hellokitty> Will you two please flirt somewhere other than the irc channel?  
<@azimov> shut up, little suzi  
<@azimov> NIELLLLLLLLLLLLLSON  
<@jdn> oh for fuck's sake what do you want  
<@azimov> world domination  
<@azimov> a billion dollars  
<@azimov> a blowjob  
<@azimov> a burger  
<@unclevanya> your mom?  
<@jdn> that's my line, chen  
<@azimov> fuck i'm bored today  
<@hellokitty> We noticed.  
<@azimov> thought i'd finally managed to get somewhere with this but the fucker keeps crashing  
<@azimov> is anyone getting anything accomplished today?  
<@unclevanya> not if you don't shut up, we aren't  
<@hellokitty> Group /ignore party?  
<@azimov> hey  
<@azimov> group party  
<@azimov> that sounds great  
<@azimov> let's go down to temple and play some pool. we can call it an offsite strategy meeting  
<@azimov> shit, i forgot i'm not in charge anymore  
<@azimov> HEY NIELSON  
<@jdn> you really are lucky i don't have you on /ignore  
<@azimov> whattya say to taking us all out for an afternoon of playing pool and drinking beer  
<@azimov> not that i've ever seen any evidence that you have a life but  
<@hellokitty> You know, that's actually not a bad idea.  
<@unclevanya> sure, i'm game  
<@unclevanya> haven't tested your fake id for a while virta  
<@jdn> oh what the hell  
<@jdn> grab your wallets  
<@azimov> wow, he really \*isn't\* some kind of advanced robot sent from the future to kick our asses  
<@jdn> you're too young to know that movie. saddle up, kids, the terminator always wins at pool

\*

He and Suzukimo win, six games to one.

If he closes his eyes and pretends, it's almost like being back at O'Malley's.

\*

The worst part is how he almost, *almost* keeps slipping into thinking that this is normal.

Wake up at 0500. (Or give up and admit that he's not getting back to sleep again. Or to sleep at all.) Shower and change. Coffee. The fucking Ikea-monstrosity apartment comes with hot and cold running concierge service; they stock his kitchen for him, everything from paper towels to coffee to beer to fruits and vegetables he always has to force himself to eat. (Easier to call for delivery. When the snake doesn't want him for a command performance over dinner, that is.) He doesn't usually bother with breakfast; the office has enough food for him to choose from, stocked in the break room. (One of these days he really has to go wandering through the building and see how the peons are treated. He's pretty sure that they don't get the same perks that *arede rigueur* up where the snake keeps all the people who are working on something it needs for its nefarious purposes.)

He's out on the streets by 0600 most mornings. The car always follows him, from the moment he leaves the building. It's one of the reasons why he knows the apartment is being watched; there wouldn't be enough time for his minders to get moving if it were the concierge desk tipping them off when he goes out. (One morning he's going to roll straight out of bed and out the door, just to be a shit. See whether they park outside all night, in shifts, on watch.) Run for an hour. Two hours. However long it takes for him to see whether the snake is going to call him in today. (It hasn't joined him again. Not past that one morning. Thank fuck for small favors.)

It's stopped calling him, most mornings. Trusting he'll come back when he's done. Giving him a longer rope with which to hang himself. He doesn't stop bringing its cappuccino; those stolen morning moments when he breezes by Esmeralda the Wonder Secretary and watches her turn up her nose at him are worth it, just for the chance to annoy the ever-living fuck out of her. Establishing an identity. See *who I am*.

From the snake's office back out through the reception area. (He and Narciso, the executive floor receptionist, have an unspoken treaty of mutually benevolent ignoring. Narciso is horrified by his version of corporate attire. He thinks Narciso is a useless waste of space.) Through the glass door, down the rabbit hole (we're all mad here), past where the ninja accountants and the snazzy-suited boys tasked with finding companies to conquer all sit. Back to the back corner, the Happy Hacker Haven. First one of his team in, most mornings. First one on the floor, half the time. He's still never beaten the snake here. Must be an advantage, not to need sleep.

Fucking snake.

From there, a day of staring at code. Trying things. Backing up when they don't work. Trying again. Getting frustrated sometimes, blowing off a few hours by reading his blogroll or getting into revert wars on Wikipedia. Getting bored with that and delving back into the decompiler; catching a brainwave and pounding out line after line of code, trailing off after a while when inspiration deserts him, going to portscan the fuck out of the networks that are on the list of targets Ba'al or Rickowski keeps emailing him for the team. (Hasn't seen Rickowski face-to-face since he got here, but there's an email in his inbox every Monday morning like clockwork, so he knows the guy hasn't dropped off the face of the earth.) Eventually someone orders lunch. Eventually it's mid-afternoon, and he goes to spend an hour in the gym. Eventually someone will look up blearily, blink a few times, and realize it's dinnertime. Sometimes it's even him. Eventually he sleeps. Or doesn't.

The worst part is how it's almost like the life he built for himself.

Easy, so easy, to forget where he is. What he's doing. Why he's doing it. Four years ago he'd woken from his sleep to find that forty years had melted away (in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump). He'd wandered lost for so long. So many choices. So many chances. If things had turned out differently, if he hadn't gotten the bright idea to email Carter and ask her for a name, an address, he might have found himself here, or somewhere much like it, on his own.

He's starting to think of Carter more readily these days. Of Teal'c. (Daniel.) That's a bad sign.

When he'd left Colorado Springs four years ago, he'd left with only a few pieces of knowledge, burning inside his chest like a gaping wound. That he had to walk away completely. That he couldn't ever look back. That he would go mad if he'd allowed himself to dwell on what he'd lost. Months of running until he'd finally realized he had to stop. (Pastor James, with quiet confidence: *Jonathan, I don't know what you're running from, but I do know that a life spent running from isn't worth spit. You need to figure out something to run to.*) Months after that spent in residence, Zen monastery down in Oregon, where they'd given him his vows and his purpose and his realization: not a curse. A chance.

Start over. Blank slate. Put in the things you've always wanted; leave behind the things that do nothing but weigh you down. How many people ever get the chance to do that? (*If I'd known then what I know now...*)

But the price of getting what you always wanted is living with the price that others paid to get you there. His life (up until that moment, that realization, sitting next to a stream and hearing Carter and Teal'c and Daniel telling him he wasn't *areal* boy) had been a series of choices to serve: serve his country, serve his people, serve his ideals. The only way he'd found to integrate *that* and *this* had been to box up all his history, all his memory, all the pieces and scraps of the life he was walking away from. Not in the way he always used to. (Ignore. Deny. *Repress.*) He'd just ... made that life be someone else's.

Not forgetting. (Never forgetting. There are sentences under his skin in an iconography only he can read; they shout his stories at him when he faces himself in the mirror.) But distancing. For the past two years, he's remembered being Jack O'Neill as one might remember a role assumed in a dream, discarded upon waking. Mere fragments rose from the miasma of recollection to taunt him, piecemeal, when prompted by an association: a look, a taste, a smell. He'd learned not to flee them; he'd learned all the dangers of defining yourself as *not*. But he'd given them up. Not *his*, not anymore. The lives and fortunes of a distant stranger, remembered in passing, cherished for the pain and beauty they'd held at the time and set aside in his process of *becoming*.

He's remembering O'Neill's history again. O'Neill's patterns. O'Neill's self.

To do this, he needs to *be* O'Neill. Sworn to service. Capable of doing the things that need to be done. And not just O'Neill as he is now; O'Neill as he was, as *they* were, in the days that aren't written down anywhere, in the days that live only in his (their) mind.

The price of getting what you always wanted is bearing the weight of all the doors you shut behind you. All the things you turned your back on. All the selves you ever were.

The price of turning around and opening those doors again is having to bear up beneath what's behind them.

\*

"You never change into gym clothes," Virta says, coming out of the locker room wearing shorts and t-shirt. "You scared that if I see your manly muscles I'll swoon?"

He still has no fucking clue whether Virta's actually hitting on him or if it's just smack-talk. "Lazy," he says. "C'mere. Gimme a hand racking these."

Virta wanders over to the freeweights. Watches him wrestle another twenty-pound weight onto the end of the bar. "No, seriously, man. I don't think I've ever seen you in anything other than jeans and a long-sleeve. You're not hiding something, are you?"

He closes his eyes. "Is this gonna be another round of you prying into my personal life? If it is, we can just skip to the hand-to-hand so I can beat the shit out of you."

"I'm just asking," Virta shrugs. "Thought maybe you and the boss were into something kinky or something, something that leaves marks."

The only way to deal with something like this is to mouth right back. "Why, you looking to get in on the action?"

He looks up just in time to see the blush spreading over Virta's cheeks. Curse of a fine complexion; you can see the instant the kid gets embarrassed. "No," Virta says. "I mean. I just --"

It's awkward enough, fumbling enough, that he takes pity. "I don't like dealing with people, is all. Here." Nobody else in the gym; three o'clock in the afternoon, it's usually deserted. It's why he comes here in mid-afternoon. He crosses his arms across his chest, grabs the hem of his t-shirt. Pulls it up and over his head. Holds out his arms, turns slowly.

Been a while since he's shown off the ink. He and Katelyn designed it so it fits his body like a garment, easily concealed, something he can choose to reveal if he wants. He doesn't mind people seeing, as long as he doesn't have to explain. As long as they won't ask what it means.

It's a good test, he's found. The people who can look at his flesh and see past the delicate black lines, understand and comprehend without needing to be told that they are trophy and remembrance and scar all at once, are the people who are worth getting to know.

"Oh, holy shit." Virta's voice is reverent; he takes an involuntary step forward. Holds up a hand, then stills, giving a look like he's asking for permission to touch. "Holy fucking *shit*."

"That's why," he says. "People ask stupid questions."

Virta flashes him a quick grin. "Yeah. I can fucking imagine. How much did it hurt, how long did it take, what does it mean, why would you do something like that to yourself. What else you have tattooed. How far down it goes. Am I right?"

He lets his arms drop, feeling like he's letting out a breath he was only barely aware of holding. "Yeah. Something like that."

Virta's hand creeps a fraction of a centimeter closer, his fingertips spread and questing like he wants to feel skin, read the Braille of the sentences there over and over until he can tease forth meaning. "Your artist is fucking incredible. You must have spent *weeks* getting that right."

For a second, he's tempted to turn into that touch. To feel someone touching him, skin against skin, *contact*. Something cleaner. Something that doesn't come with a snake's twisted motives behind it.

It shocks him more that it doesn't shock him. He'd gotten too used to having the comfort of human connection; in a way, it's the thing he misses the most. (*Don't think about --*)



He steps away. Keeps his voice even. Shakes out his shirt, pulls it back over his head. With his armor of clothing in place, he feels less vulnerable, less exposed. Less open. "Yeah," he says. "We did. Come on, let's get moving. I wanna get back to work some time this century."

The lines of his stories underneath his skin itch and burn for the rest of the afternoon.

\*

*He leans out the window, cigarette in hand, the heavy August air weighing down on him. Late, and he needs to make an early start. His next contact is in Bydgoszcz in two days. He should have left last night. The room smells like sweat, and sex, and the faint few traces of the last cigarette he'd smoked before turning out the lights.*

*Anna's voice from behind him is sleepy. Wyjeżdżasz z samego rana. [You're leaving in the morning.]*

*He can't tell if she's asking him or telling him. Tak. Mam kilka... spraw do załatwienia. [Yes. I have ... things I need to do.]*

*The silence is at least as heavy as the humidity. It adds more weight, until he thinks he might choke with it. Powinienes już iść [You should leave now] , Anna says, finally. Slowly. Like the words are being torn out of her, like she might break and choke any moment. Nie wracaj. To niebezpieczne. To... [Don't come back. It's dangerous. It...]*

*He turns from the window. Anna is still lying in the bed, the sheets tangled around her body, too thin for her height or too tall for her weight. Co mi chcesz powiedzieć? [What do you want to say to me?]*

*She looks back at him, her eyes full of tears. Przepraszam. Przepraszam. Przyszli do mnie... kilka miesięcy temu przyszli i wypytywali mnie... o ciebie, o nas... Idź już. Tu nie jest bezpiecznie. Oni wkrótce tu będą. Powiedzieli, żebym cię zatrzymała. [I'm sorry. I'm sorry. They came to me ... a couple of months ago, they came and they were asking me ... about you, about us ... Leave now. It's not safe here. They'll come, soon. They told me to keep you here.] Her voice drops to a whisper. Idź już i nie wracaj, bo inaczej cię złapią. Przepraszam. Staralam się powiedzieć im jak najmniej. [Leave now and don't come back, or they'll catch you. I'm sorry. I tried to tell them as little as I could.]*

*The cigarette smolders. He can see blood, underneath his fingernails. He breathes in, opening his mouth to say something, to ask why, why, why --*

*-- but the burn of cigarette smoke in his lungs turns into the burn of his throat tearing from the hook-barbed scales of a symbiote's fins, into the fear-stink filth of Abu Ghraib, and Gryzbowski becomes ad-Douri becomes Ba'al, leaning over him, smiling, always smiling --*

\*

The dreams are why he's trying not to sleep much anymore.

\*

Enough is enough; time to get this party started. He spends all weekend in the office. That isn't new; he usually spends weekends in the office, sometimes alone, sometimes joined by one or more of the Wunderkinder. Nine-to-five, Monday-through-Friday, doesn't apply when you're an evil genius working for an evil overlord. But he has the place to himself this time. He puts it to good use.

Virta's the first in on Monday morning, finding him sitting at his desk, headphones slung around his neck but not on his ears, his fingers flying over the keyboard. "Whoa," Virta says, coming up short. "Somebody declare today an Interesting Problem day and just forget to tell me?"

"Route in," he says, neat and clipped, not looking up. "Broke it last night." And stayed at his desk, working through the night, catnapping beneath the desk when the fatigue began to fog him -- twenty minutes here, thirty minutes there. Making it look good for the cameras. He's had so much coffee that his elbows and wrists are vibrating, faintly, and the outlines of the world look overexposed and blurry.

Virta pauses, like he can't believe what he hears, and then laughs. "Fucking hell. I owe you that grand?"

"Not yet. Haven't gotten that far. But I got a shitload of data off their NIPRNet node. I just yanked it all and wiped the connection logs. We'll be analyzing it for fucking months to see if there's anything we can use in there." He finishes up the paragraph -- the ability to type and speak two different things at the same time is a survival trait around here -- and flips over to the window where he keeps his email open. "Sending you all the postmortem now."

"Nice." Virta sounds full of genuine admiration. "What was it?"

"A chain about eight layers deep, is what it was, but it starts with a race condition in ssh, goes through about five other tortured hops, and winds up getting root through a flaw in emacs." He looks up, smirks. "Guess they were too busy looking for the text editor they lost in there somewhere to notice."

"Oh, fuck you," Virta says -- vim vs. emacs is always good for another round -- and logs onto his own workstation, not even bothering to sit down before pulling up email. "You dump the tarball of what you got on the ftp?"

"Yeah," he says. (Carter spent weeks coming up with a dataset that could be handed over to the snake without compromising anything too sensitive. Mostly techno-babble from R&D about reverse-engineering the Goa'uld tech they have on hand, things the snake already has or can do. Still. It makes his fucking teeth itch to just hand it over.) "Imaged the whole system, too. Didn't change anything. Didn't want to install a rootkit; I know they md5-checksum most of the common targets every night as part of the routine security audit. But I'm pretty confident I can get back in whenever I want."

"Nice," Virta repeats. Then looks up. "You haven't slept, have you."

He leans back in his chair, laces his fingers together, reaches them over his head and to the ceiling. Virta's eyes flash, oh-so-briefly, to the strip of stomach that shows over his waistband, flick away. "Napped a bit under the desk. Here and there. Didn't want to lose it before I got something. You know how fucking crazy this has been driving me."

"Go tell the boss," Virta says. "I'll read your postmortem, pick up from here."

He's not worried -- there's layer after layer to the honeypot, carefully-constructed snake-bait that can keep the Wunderkinder spinning their wheels for months. Thinking they're getting somewhere, and all the while just traipsing down Carter's merry little rabbit-hole. So he can afford to hand it over to Virta now; he's done his part.

This should be worth at least a few credits on the 'trust' side of the equation. If he's lucky.

He opens up his desk, pulls out a thumb drive. "Yeah," he says. "Probably a good idea. I captured a few core dumps they had sitting around, was gonna go trawling through those in case any of them give us another route."

Virta nods. "Go," he says. "I've got it from here. You go show the boss. Then *gosleep*. You're crazy enough on a normal day, I don't even want to think about what you'll be like if you've been up all fucking night."

"Not much different than usual," he says, just to see Virta laugh, and takes the thumb drive with him when he goes.

\*

The snake's opaqued the glass of its office; no fishbowl today. Esmeralda the Wonder Secretary rises as if to stop him, but he sails straight by, opens the door without knocking. "Brought you a present," he singsongs, thumb drive dangling from his fingertips. Snake's on the phone: headset piece in its ear to match the one in his own, arms folded over its chest, standing in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows and watching the shafts of uncharacteristic sunlight peeking through the rain clouds. It holds up a hand for silence; he decides that pushing his luck isn't a good plan, so he shuts.

Instead, he drops down into one of the two "let's pretend we're having a serious conference" chairs, hooks one knee over the arm. Watches the snake. It's listening to whoever's on the other end of the line, and it doesn't look happy. He tries to work up some sympathy. Doesn't get very far.

"I said *fourteen*," it snaps. "Not twenty. That's not acceptable." Pause. He entertains himself by trying to figure out which poor sucker's in serious hot water this time, trying to figure out whether or not he should care about whoever's on the other end of the phone. "I'm not certain what makes you believe I'll accept excuses."

Pause, while whoever's getting his ass handed to him contributes a flurry of words. He can't hear them at all, even as a soft, distant buzz; that's one advantage to the bone-conduction earpiece. The snake looks like it's working up a big head of fury, until its eyes fall on him. Then its face turns thoughtful.

"Stop," it says, and whoever's on the other end must, as quickly as though the snake's words had been accompanied by a shot from a zat. The snake's lips tilt upwards. He doesn't like that smile. "If you can't accomplish what I sent you there to do, I'll send you some ... assistance."

Pause. The snake shakes its head. "No. Find some reason to stall. My agent will be there as soon as possible. And if you fuck it up before then, I shall be most displeased."

He doesn't hear the snake swear often; it's a shock whenever it does. The snake's reaching up, pulling out the headset's earpiece, dropping it on the desk. "Congratulations," it says to him. "Pack your bags."

There are a lot of things that could mean. He doesn't like any of them. "Yeah?" he says. "You taking me to Vegas for a weekend of sin and debauchery? I hear the Luxor's nice this time of year. They've got this giant beam of light --"

The snake seems far too pleased with itself. Practically fucking giddy with whatever idea it's just had, and that spells trouble all around, and he *knows* he is not going to like this. "No," it says. It's being Balim now, all snazzy suit and corporate raider. "I have a test for you."

Shit. *Shit*. "Yeah, no thanks," he says, ignoring the spike of adrenaline under his ribcage (won't do any good; fight-or-flight isn't an option here, thanks very much, endocrine system). "I bailed on doing high school again because I don't test well."

Ba'al snorts, a harsh and indelicate sound. There's a part of him that's actually proud every time he manages to get the fucking snake to crack that perfectly-controlled seeming. "Yes, yes," it says, waving a hand. It moves to stand by the chair he's sitting in. He squints up at it. "It amuses you to make me think you aren't taking this seriously. It amuses me that you feel the need to. Let us take it as a given for the remainder of this conversation and have a serious discussion about goals."

Fucking flaming shit on a stick. He'd been hoping for this moment, but nothing in the world could get him ready for it. And this isn't how he thought it would happen. Thought it'd take longer. Another couple days, at least. Thought he'd have more time to run the what-ifs in his head. "Yeah?" he says, making himself sound casual. He sets his leg to swinging and tries to look like he's not frantically running attacks and defenses in his head. "What kind of goals you talking about, Skippy?"

Ba'al smiles again. Sits down in the chair across from him, wearing its body as naturally as it wears the suit, perfectly at home. "You came to me and told me you believed we could be of use to each other. You're well aware I hardly trust your offer. I am prepared to stipulate that perhaps your motives may be what you say they are; I'm giving you a chance to prove your use."

It isn't often that he makes the effort to completely drop the hybrid-teenager body language he's been forced to learn, lets himself fill out his own skin the way he still thinks (in a part of him, deep down) that he should, but he does it now. Doesn't quite shift his weight, doesn't quite change his position, just relaxes *this* and tenses *that* and when all's said and done, he knows it's Jack O'Neill sitting across from the snake for a little chat, because the snake's eyes get that little glimmer that means he's managed to do something interesting again.

"Yeah?" he says. "I'd ask whose dick I have to suck, but you've already got that covered."

The snake's eyes close, simple irritation. "I did say we could dispense with the sarcasm," it says.

He smirks. "Part and parcel." Delaying tactic, really; he's got a scenario now, or at least a set of lines. "Okay. I'll watch my mouth. What do you have on offer?"

"A mission," the snake says, simply. "I find myself in need of sending several security professionals to provide some assistance to a negotiating team. While you are there, I will assign you some ... additional tasks."

He can feel his eyes going flat. "Keep talking."

The snake rises from the chair, crosses over to its desk. "I have had the pleasure of General O'Neill's acquaintance," it says: bone-dry, bleeding. "I have found him to be a man of a certain level of, shall we say, honor. Commitment to an ideal, perhaps. I've known for quite some time that if he could be persuaded to see things differently, that commitment could be quite valuable to a cause."

It leans over, opens a desk drawer. Reaches far in, does something complex and invisible in the back, and when it stands back up, it's got a file folder in its hands. He pretends at disinterest, but he's watching the whole thing like a hawk: so, that's where the

snake keeps things it doesn't want other people to find. He doubts he'll ever have the chance to toss the office, not without being spotted by the security cameras, but it's still good to know.

"I have reason to believe that your goals are quite different than his are," the snake says. "And you've done an excellent job at convincing me that those goals and mine don't diverge too wildly." *Yeah, you fucker, you like to think that.* "It's time to -- what is the expression? 'Put up or shut up?'"

Trying to figure out how to play this is a fucking *bitch and a half*, but he takes a stab at it: what's the one thing Ba'al would think O'Neill would be least willing to do? Put that way, the answer comes clear. "Yeah?" he says. "Who do you need me to kill for you?"

He's intending it to be a rhetorical question; he's pretty sure the snake doesn't quail at assassination, but he's also pretty sure the snake has teams of Jaffa to handle those petty little details. But the snake chucks the file folder across the room -- perfect goddamn trajectory that makes it sail straight onto the coffee table and stop just before it pitches over the edge -- and says, "The idiot who believes he can get away with skimming millions of dollars without me noticing. And while you're at it, you'll also be taking over his position on the negotiating committee and get me that company for the price I'm willing to pay for it."

He's glad for the prop; it gives him something to look down at until he's certain he's schooled his face into a proper expression. The dossier's thin, but detailed enough. David Clancy, age 43, lawyer, divorced, two kids, personal net worth 1.4 million official, 8.9 million if you count the assets socked away offshore. Works with Bezian in global dev. In New York right now, negotiating for the purchase of Ressler-Szdinski Business Solutions. Had his fingers in Farrow-Marshall's accounts for the past six months. Personal data says he's a slimeball. Professional data says he's a *stupid* slimeball, if he thought he'd get away with fucking the snake over.

Ba'al's watching him from over steepled fingers, and he realizes it's looking for a reaction. Some kind of disgust. Some kind of pushback to give himself away. Ba'al thinks Jack O'Neill would quail at assassination. The Jack O'Neill Ba'al knew might have. Probably would have.

And *he* would too -- *I will not kill, but respect all life*, and he'd meant it, he'd fucking *meant* it, meant it in a way that he's meant very little before or since -- except he fucking *can't*, and he'd known that this was going to be a possibility from moment one. If he does this, there's a good chance the snake will trust him. Trust him more, at least. There's a good chance the snake will allow him more access, provide him more data, show him the next layer of the onion he's here to peel. One dead scumbag versus the whole of humanity kree'ing on command. He knows which one he'd rather.

Wouldn't be the first time.

So he looks up (calm, controlled). "Yeah," he says. "No problem. Well, couple of logistical problems, nothing major. You want it to look like an accident, natural causes, or a big messy warning?"

Ba'al laughs. Actually *laughs*, fucking snake, and there's a part of him, even with the armor he's tried to construct -- the armor that will allow him to face the snake without flinching -- that wants to recoil. "Oh, whatever you see fit," it says, waving an artless hand. "I don't believe in micro-management. What logistical problems?"

*Keep going. Think fast.* He lifts a hand, ticks off the points on his fingers. "Homeworld's gotta know I'm gone by now; they've been keeping tabs on me for years. I travel on my own ID, the game's up before it's even started. I'd get picked up at the airport before I even got on the plane. I'll need new paper."

Ba'al nods. There's a little smile playing across its lips. "Already done. What else?"

Next finger. "I don't work for an audience. Call off the goons." He waits for a response, but all Ba'al does is nod, so he goes on to the next point. "I'll assume that you want to send me in there posing as some kind of security auditor, due diligence on their company systems, something like that?" The snake nods, but doesn't say anything. "And I'll also assume that you want to send one of the Wunderkinder along with me to do the *actual* break-and-enter while I'm ... otherwise occupied. I want Virta."

He's expecting a protest to that -- expecting the snake to want to send Caciirelli, expecting the snake to want to keep an eye on him -- but all the snake does is nod again. "I had intended to let you choose, yes. Done. What else?"

Something about that easy capitulation rings *wrong* to him, but he doesn't push. He'll try to figure it out later. For now, he just holds up another finger. "Nineteen-year-old kid. Nobody's going to listen to shit I say. I don't want to be the next head on the chopping block if I don't get your price."

"We'll consider that a nice side bonus if you manage it," Ba'al murmurs. "But I have full faith and confidence."

He snorts. "Yeah. Thanks. Fifth, I don't know shit about the company. I need the file. The real file. I don't work blind."

Ba'al reaches into its suit jacket, pulls out a Goa'uld data crystal from the inside pocket. It repeats the throwing-shit-exactly-where-it-wants-it-to-go trick again; it lands neatly and precisely in his lap. Fucking snake reflexes. "You'll find it on there," it says. "There's a reader unit in the guest office in the southeast section of this floor. Don't try to take the crystal out of the building; the janitorial staff would rather hate to have to clean up your blood and fragments of brains from the marble in the lobby when you cross the threshold."

"Ha," he says. He uncoils himself from the chair, stands up, shoves the data crystal in the back pocket of his jeans (makes a mental note not to sit down too fast, because the damn things *look* like they break if you so much as breathe over them, and they're more stable than they look, but not by much; he's snapped a few by accident over the years).

The snake's watching him. Combination of curious and amused. "I shall leave the arrangements in your no-doubt-capable hands," it says.

"Hell you will," he says. "I don't do the details someone else can do for me. Have Esmeralda the Wonder Secretary book us tomorrow night, redeye. Into JFK, not LaGuardia. Car to pick us up at the airport. Make sure you book us into the same hotel as Clancy. Separate rooms for the both of us. I don't share. I'll handle the rest of it." He smiles, tight-lipped. "Just tell me what name I'm supposed to be answering to. And have someone deliver a couple of suits in my size to the hotel, because I'll be fucked if I'm going shopping on my own time."

The curiosity in the snake's expression is ceding ground to the amusement, and that's good. It's what he's aiming for. He's posturing to conceal any hint that he doesn't want to do this -- *really* doesn't want to do this -- but the snake isn't going to listen to anyone who isn't willing to get his hands dirty. The snake's probably looking to see if he's going to take the chance to slip his leash, pass intel up to O'Neill or Homeworld about what the snake's up to. He's not going to. Balancing act. He's going to have to trust that O'Neill's people will be able to make him even if he's not traveling under his own name, that O'Neill will know enough to know not to approach him.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" the snake inquires, one eyebrow raised. He gets the impression it's pleased by the show of spine. Of course, he's spent long enough establishing himself as someone who won't just jump when the snake says frog, and any attempt to kowtow now, even when he's setting forth to do the snake's bidding, would be suspicious. Besides, he's pretty sure the snake thinks he's cute. Like kittens and puppies and little baby sharks.

"I'll catch up with you tomorrow for the rest of the details," he says. "Once I have my arrangements made. I'm assuming the Wunderkinder don't know the real mission?"

"You assume correctly," the snake says. "I would prefer that this condition persist."

He nods. "Easier that way anyway. Don't think any of them know what it means to get their hands dirty for real, instead of virtually." He picks up the dossier on Clancy -- he's skimmed through it already; there's not much in there, but it'd look odd if he didn't take it -- and strides for the door.

The snake's voice stops him. "Jack?"

The snake's never called him anything but. (Tiny little power games, over and over, endlessly repeated.) So he puts a snarl in his voice as he turns around. "What?"

"You said you brought me a present," Ba'al murmurs. "And you didn't elaborate."

Oh. Yeah. "Got distracted," he says. He's still got the thumb drive palmed, its chain wrapped around his left hand's fingers; he'd forgotten. He lifts his hand to show it, dangling. "Got in at Groom Lake. Pulled a whole shitpot of data for you. Have fun."

Doesn't bother taking aim, just whips the thumb drive at the snake's head. Tiny little power games. Endlessly repeated. The snake doesn't move to catch it. He's pleased to see that it goes straight where he wanted it to go: straight past the snake's left ear, clattering into the custom-built show-off credenza stuffed with books the snake never reads, skittering into the corner of the shelf the cleaning service won't allow to gather dust.

Petty victory. But hey, it's his.

\*

So much for going back to the apartment and going to sleep.

Virta takes the news with annoyance. "Fuck," he says. "This is way more interesting. Why the hell does the boss want us *there*? Doesn't make sense. We can crack their shit just as easily from here."

He shrugs in response. "Ours not to reason why," he says. "Ours just to pack our bags."

"Bring me back a souvenir," Suzukimo says, snapping her gum. "One of those tacky plastic Statue of Liberty models. We can tie it up and use it as a piñata."

"I worry about the way your mind works," he tells her, and goes off to dig up the reader for the control crystal. Not enough time to cram it all into his head, but he'll make a good start.

He's only halfway through the first layer of it, though, when he finds the part that he knows the snake wanted him to find. Ressler-Szdinski Business Solutions is one of the companies that provides services to the SGC. Recruiting, mostly, and that chills his fucking blood, because if the snake gets Ressler-Szdinski, that'll be its route in. A little extra work to find people who'll pass the background check the SGC uses -- thorough enough that he knows they went to talk to Daniel's fourth grade English teacher -- but still.

Even worse: he's going to negotiate on behalf of one of the subsidiaries of Farrow-Marshall, one that doesn't connect to Ba'al -- to Balim -- on paper. Clancy's carried on the books as being employed by Sphynx Engineering, and Sphynx isn't one of the arms of Farrow-Marshall that O'Neill gave him intel on. He knows just enough, now, to know that a background check at the deepest level will never connect Farrow-Marshall (or Balim) with ownership of Sphynx. He's being sent to buy the route by which the SGC will be compromised.

Going to have to trust that O'Neill's people will be smart enough to notice his absence here, his presence *there*, and assemble the pieces. Going to have to trust that O'Neill will be smart enough not to act on the knowledge unless it becomes pressing, too, because they're playing a long, deep game, and the snake has to believe it's winning.

It's easier -- but only a little -- to put aside the file on Ressler-Szdinski and turn to Clancy's dossier. The man's dirty all the way down through. One of Ba'al's original liaisons to the Trust, one of the ways by which Ba'al compromised them. Been stealing from Ba'al for years, most likely, which the snake has been letting slide.

He wonders what made the snake change its mind, what makes Clancy's removal such a priority now. Maybe Clancy got a little too greedy. Maybe Clancy's served his purpose. Maybe Clancy knows too much.

Maybe the snake just wants to test him, and in order to do so, someone has to die.

By mid-afternoon he's starting to piece together a tentative plan. Hardest part's going to be keeping Virta from catching a whiff of anything. (He catches himself thinking that and stops. Hardest part's going to be killing a man in cold blood, he tells himself, and he knows it should be true, and it isn't.) He mentions the plan to the snake when he brings the data crystal back. The snake likes it. Likes it enough to tell him where to pick up the extra props.

Turns out there's an entire O-chem research lab in the basement. Who'd'a thunk it. (His keycard works to open the door now, too. He wonders what else the snake's given him access to.) Lab director's pleased as punch to help him out, and doesn't even bother asking why; he's on an all-access pass from the snake, and that's good enough.

He packs for a week. It'll be nice to get away from the snake for a while.

\*

Virta's like a kid in a fucking candy store on the flight. First time in first class. First time staying in a luxury hotel. They're booked at the Benjamin; damn nice suites. Better than the place he's staying in Seattle. (Anything would be, even a hole in the fucking wall down in Alphabet City.)

"Listen," he says to Virta, pausing in the hallway as they're about to part ways, each to shower and change before they meet up with the rest of the negotiations team. "The boss gave me some extra shit to do while I'm here. He wants me to sit in on the actual

negotiations, see if I can squeeze some extra concessions out of them. I'm telling everybody that I'm his executive intern, here to get some experience in mergers and acquisitions. Don't blow my cover, okay?"

Virta grins. "Awesome. Spy vs. spy, right? Hey, let me come along. It'll be fun."

He closes his eyes. Having an extra person dogging his heels is only going to make this difficult. "We'll see," he temporizes. "Dress up, okay? We're meeting with the team over in room 1604 before we head over to the headquarters."

Virta pretends to salute. It's messy and sloppy and badly-formed, and it makes his stomach turn over. "Yes, sir!" Virta sing-songs. "Rendezvous in twenty minutes, sir!"

Lord, deliver him from amateurs.

The team consists of three people, all lawyers. Clancy's the head; the other two are Aguire and Hopkinson, neither of whom make more than a two-minute impression on him. He introduces himself as Jack Bauerlin, the name on his ID -- snake's got a sense of humor -- and acts stumbling and awkward and nervous: sent to sink-or-swim, pretty sure he's going to fail, dreading Balim's reaction when he does, making a decent stab at it anyway.

He's got Clancy eating out of the palm of his hand within fifteen minutes. Clancy's falling all over himself to be helpful --*poor stupid kid, Balim's going to eat him alive when he fucks up* -- and he's not above using it. He picks Clancy's brain about the negotiations with Ressler-Szdinski the entire time they're in the limo on the way to the office. Virta watches, mouth shut (for a change), eyes shining. When Clancy looks away, Virta mouths, *dude, you're scary*.

Yeah. He knows.

New York's pretty, even in the middle of the winter. When they get to Ressler-Szdinski's offices, he sends Virta off with their CTO (mouthing something about a security audit -- Virta's got a briefcase full of CDs and papers, and all he needs is ten minutes alone with a terminal to get any intel he wants). He stays with the negotiations team in the boardroom. Keeps his mouth shut and listens. Clancy's playing softball. He could get a better price for the company with one hand tied behind his back.

They regroup in Clancy's suite that night to discuss strategy, and that's when he suggests they stay in and order room service. Talk over dinner. Figure out what their next move's gonna be. He's looking straight at Clancy when he says it, and he doesn't miss the way the man's shoulders come up, the way he straightens his tie. He's been shaking his ass at Clancy all day -- literally, metaphorically -- while being as charming and disarming as possible. And he's pretty sure Balim has a reputation for how he treats his executive interns -- and what other services those interns are usually expected to provide. Clancy's already thinking about the things he wants Clancy to think about.

Aguire and Hopkinson decline the dinner offer -- something about already having other plans -- but Virta sticks through it. It's a pity; dinner would have been a perfect chance. Still. He makes it a point of charging room service to his own corporate credit card (also issued to Jack Bauerlin, care of Sphynx Engineering) instead of to Clancy's room. He's the one to answer the door when the delivery guy knocks, too. Acts bumbling and awkward, unused to being waited on, insisting on helping with the setup instead of getting out of the way.

Dinner's good. Better than room service usually is. It's what he'd expect, from a place like this.

"Dude," Virta says in the hallway, once they say their goodnights and leave Clancy behind in his room. "You are fucking *terrifying* when you go into interrogation mode like that. I thought you were going to get him to tell you his fucking life story any second."

He fumbles in his pocket for his room cardkey. "I like people," he says. "I like talking to them. Figuring out their stories. You never know when it might be useful."

Virta snorts. "Sounded more like flirting to me. You sure the boss isn't going to get jealous?"

"The boss told me to get the total price down to one-fifty-five," he says. "Didn't say anything about how I was supposed to do it. If making googly eyes at Clancy is going to get me more information about how to negotiate, it's worth it." He sticks the keycard into his reader, holds open the door with one hand. "If you get me some of the skeletons in Ressler-Szdinski's closet, it'll be more worth it. Anything useful yet?"

"Not yet," Virta says. "Couldn't drop the Trojan until late afternoon. I was going to crawl through things after dinner. I'll get back to you."

Perfect opportunity, and he's not going to waste it. "I'll come over later on, then, after I get a chance to shower and change again, unwind a little. I need to email the boss and check in, anyway, and there are a few things about Ressler-Szdinski that I wanted to look up. Then I might go back over and ask Clancy a few more questions, see what else I can put together for tomorrow. I'll come over in a couple of hours, see how far you've gotten."

"I'll have something for you by then, promise," Virta says. "Anything else you need me to do?"

It's kind of nice having someone listening when he gives orders. Been a long time. He shakes his head. "Just get me something I can use against them," he says, and ducks back into his room.

Alone at last, he takes the time to shower again -- he likes New York, but it always leaves him feel grimy, like a thin film of dust and sweat is collecting on his skin -- and change. Long-sleeved t-shirt, pair of sweatpants. Deep pockets. He fills them with the few things he'll need, then raids the minibar: three bottles in his pockets, one in his hand. Brings a glass with him. He crosses the hallway again, knocks on Clancy's door. Clancy opens it almost immediately; his tie is missing, and the top three buttons on his shirt are open.

He holds up the tiny minibar bottle of whiskey, the glass to accompany it. "Thought I'd come over for a drink, and we could finish that conversation," he says.

Clancy's eyes sweep down his body, back up to his face. He knows what he looks like. Barefoot, freshly-showered, his wet hair loose around his collar instead of pulled back in a ponytail the way he usually keeps it. His skin, slightly red from scrubbing. In his loosest pair of sweatpants, the thin ones, the ones that cling to his body like a film and outline everything underneath. He's not wearing any underwear.

Clancy opens the door. "Come on in," he says.

He crosses the room on bare feet, heads over to the minibar before Clancy can, opens the door of the refrigerator. Two bottles of the whiskey are already missing; it must be Clancy's drink too. He takes out all the bottles he finds there, arranges them on top of

the minibar in a neat line, adds two of the ones from his pocket. Makes sure Clancy sees him taking them out. "I was really impressed with the way you dealt with MacMillan today," he says, over his shoulder, as he fills two of the glasses with ice. "I wish I could learn how to keep people from plowing straight over me like that."

It's bullshit -- Clancy let MacMillan, the CEO of Reslsaer-Szdinski, walk all over him -- but Clancy preens anyway. "It just takes practice," he says. "You'll pick it up as you get older."

"I don't think I could ever be as good at it as you are," he says. Puts an extra bit of shine in his voice. He makes sure he keeps his eyes on Clancy's, makes sure he holds Clancy's attention on his face. It's only the work of a second to dump the contents of the vial he'd palmed into Clancy's drink, unnoticed, while he talks. He used to be damn good at sleight-of-hand tricks, and this (younger) body has the manual dexterity he'd been starting to lose. And he's been practicing. "Got any tips you can share? I don't want to impose, but --"

It's all bullshit, but Clancy eats it right up. "It's not an imposition," he says. "I'm flattered. I'm happy to help."

Takes longer for Clancy to pass out than he'd been expecting, which means that he has to sit through a good twenty minutes of Dale Carnegie bullshit with a straight face. But it's all right. He doesn't have any particular timetable here.

He waits until Clancy's out cold, then strips both of them down naked and hauls Clancy's unconscious body into the bathroom. Takes a leak while he's in there, and then pulls on the nitrile gloves he'd shoved into his pocket. Turns on the water in the bathtub, as hot as it'll go, which is pretty fucking scalding; even though the gloves, it's uncomfortable to touch. Waits for the water level to get just right. Hauls Clancy into the bathtub, lets the unconscious body slide down until nose and mouth are both underwater. From there, it's only a few minutes until the bubbles stop rising.

He catches himself whistling as he heads back out into the suite, and makes himself stop. He has to do this. That doesn't mean he has to let himself going back to being casual and flippant about it. That way lies insanity. Or Poland.

Back into his clothes. He dumps Clancy's drink out into the sink and rinses the glass, runs the water after it for a good ten minutes. Puts it by the door so he doesn't forget to take it back over to his room with him, puts the bottles of whiskey he'd brought with him back into his pockets. Not the empty; he leaves that there.

He looks around himself. Nothing else needs to get picked up. His prints and his skin cells are all over the place, but it's all right. He doubts the NYPD will bother checking -- unattended deaths need an investigation, but the scene he's painting means the investigation won't be anything more than *pro forma*; cops like neat explanations, and the one he's handing them is neat enough. Still, he's established a perfectly good reason for any trace DNA evidence he left (if nothing else, the waiter is going to remember him; he overtipped); the heat of the bath water will fuck with time-of-death calculations. He's covered if they poke deeper and find him.

He's got his story all ready, just in case. *We all had dinner. Talked about the job. Went back to our rooms. I came back over to see if he had any more advice for me, we had a drink -- yeah, I know I'm underage, am I gonna get in trouble? He said he was going to take a bath to relax before he went to bed, said he'd been having trouble sleeping. Yeah. He seemed really jumpy. I'm not in trouble, am I?*

Time to fill out the scene. He finds a paperback book next to Clancy's bedside, drops it in the tub with Clancy's body. Finds Clancy's cluster of pill-bottles on the bathroom vanity. (Viagra. Lipitor. Aquatensin. Lexapro. No surprises there.) All from different pharmacies; the Viagra's an internet special. He pulls out the bottle of Versed from his bag and adds it to the collection. Label's the same grey-market internet pharmacy the Viagra came from, offshore and badly-regulated. The 'scrip is written for a hundred pills, dated last month, and there are eleven left in the bottle. The guys in the lab had been thoroughly helpful; they'd turned the other eighty-nine into a suspension for him. Technology's just grand. Old days, he'd had to grind the pills up and do it himself.

Gloves into his pockets, to be dropped in a ten-percent bleach solution tonight and disposed of in the bathroom of wherever he stops for coffee tomorrow morning -- ideally it'll be a place with single-stall bathrooms and he'll be able to duck into the ladies' room, for even better risk mitigation. One last glance around the room -- yeah, the scene's exactly what he wants it to be -- and he picks up the glass and lets himself out. Shuts the door behind him. Makes sure the do-not-disturb sign isn't on the doorknob.

His hands are completely steady as he lets himself into his own room. He takes Clancy's glass, puts it on the bathroom vanity. (Follow the lady, follow the lady. One of his glasses in Clancy's room. One of Clancy's glasses in his. It'll add up right if anyone does the math.) Dumps the bleach solution (pre-prepared) into it. Makes sure he scrubs around the rim, the outside, everywhere Clancy might have touched, then adds the gloves. They can soak overnight.

Virta answers the door after he knocks for the second time. Looks unfocused around the edges, like he's been yanked out of heavy concentration mode. "What?" he snaps.

The irritation goes away when he holds up the bottle of whiskey. "Thought I'd come over for a drink," he says.

The line works just as well the second time. And as it turns out, hey, he wasn't imagining things: Virta really has been hitting on him. And spending the night will mean having an even better alibi.

Virta's pretty good in bed. And it's nice to get the taste of snake out of his mouth.

\*

The next morning, he's up at 0500, same as he always is. Virta mumbles something sleepy and rolls away, tangling up the covers. In the dark, it takes him a minute to find his sweatpants, kicked under the bed. Can't find his t-shirt. He'll come back for it when he can turn on the lights.

He ducks back into his room, pulls out a fresh t-shirt. Decides to leave the sweats on -- he'll be wearing a suit to the negotiations today (and the snake, or the snake's people, found him a few that fit perfectly; he doesn't intend to wear them again after they return, but a suit is a uniform just like a set of dress blues), which means he'll have to come back to change anyway. Puts on a pair of underwear, though. Snowed last night. Slows him down when he's out running, slipping and skidding on the sidewalks. He cuts the run short after only about two and a half miles.

Finds a decent coffee shop to stop at, though. Not Starbucks. He hates Starbucks. (*That's because it's shit coffee, Jack. Shut up, Daniel.*) Disposing of the gloves only takes a second, and as soon as he does, it's a weight off his shoulders. Case closed. Mission complete. The NYPD will still bag and tag all the evidence from Clancy's room, but they won't bother doing any forensic testing unless the autopsy comes back with something suspicious, and he was careful. The O-chem boys swear that the tox screen results will look like Clancy just took a triple dose, nothing more suspicious than that. The NYPD won't bother screening the evidence for DNA profiles, especially given how backlogged they are.

Good thing, too. O'Neill's DNA profile isn't in CODIS, but is in the armed forces DNA database -- unless O'Neill managed to work some magic -- and while local law enforcement doesn't have access, there's always a chance things could get sticky. Wouldn't do for O'Neill to get a phone call from some NYPD detective about a dead body in a New York hotel room. And having his -- their -- DNA profile stuck in CODIS's forensic index could cause shit down the road.

He comes back with his cup of coffee. One for Virta, too. Why the hell not. Caffeine delivery is a form of geek flirtation, and he's not trying to flirt with Virta (*don't think about --*) but he needs Virta in a good mood when the cops come calling. (*Yeah, he was with me. All night. You got a problem with that?*)

He's gotta kick Virta's door for a good three minutes before Virta answers, sleepy and surly, but the coffee goes a long way to smoothing ruffled feathers. "Come on," he says. "Get dressed. I'll cab over with you." They're all in charge of their own transportation over to Ressler-Szdinski's HQ this morning. (Useful. That way they can all be halfway across the city by the time someone realizes Clancy isn't showing up.)

Virta squints at him. "You are too fucking awake," he says, but he takes the coffee anyway. "Don't talk to me. Twenty minutes. Lobby. Caffeine."

They meet up in the lobby, twenty minutes later. Virta's not treating him any differently than yesterday. Hallelujah. He doesn't have time to deal with messy personal fallout from something that wasn't anything other than a cover story and a chance to blow off some steam.

Aguire's the one to call over to the hotel when it's coming up on 0930 and there's still no sign of Clancy. First the hotel room, then the front desk. The cops are over about two hours later to deliver the news. Too bad, so sad. He's in the process of trying to browbeat the Ressler-Szdinski team of lawyers into seeing things his way when they arrive. (Aguire and Hopkinson keep staring at him like he's grown an extra head, but whatever. The calendar-age thing is working to his benefit, to his surprise; the other side's lawyers keep getting creeped out by him and giving in.)

Giving his statement only takes about half an hour, tops. He plays a neat combination of shocked (nineteen years old, hasn't run into death enough to be inured to it yet) and self-centered (no skin off my nose, only met the old guy yesterday, how is this going to affect me?) He lucked out; the detective looks like he's counting down the days until he hits his twenty and doesn't have much more to go. Doesn't relax too much -- that much experience means the cop will have a well-developed sense for when something's *soff* somehow -- but he doesn't think there are going to be problems.

There aren't. He spends the next five days taking over the negotiations by day (neither Aguire nor Hopkinson protest, especially after he gets the other side down to three-point-five mil less than the fucking snake told him to buy for) and fucking around with Virta by night. (No harm, no foul, and Virta's skinny ass doesn't fill out the other side of the bed the way his subconscious tells him someone *should*, but he still sleeps better than he has in weeks.)

Doesn't spot anybody watching him.

Doesn't mean there isn't.

\*

Downtown Seattle. Jihads Can Mean Some Uncomfortable Plans; he's waiting for the other shoe to drop, waiting for the snake to give him another target and another contract hit. Price for fucking competence. It disturbs him how easily he'd found the state of mind necessary to be able to kill, cleanly and calmly, without having to search for it. Even O'Neill can't find that mindset on command anymore. And he knows he'd be able to find that place in his head, again and again, if he has to. Makes him nervous. He knows enough to know that if he did, he'd be fucking the op worse than walking into Ba'al's office and coming completely clean would, because the person it would turn him into wouldn't be the person who'd be able to care about why he's doing what he's doing. He'd proven that a long time ago.

(No. O'Neill had proven that. He's not O'Neill anymore. Even if he remembers being.)

So. Doesn't feel like trying to learn a new route today; back down to the Sound, up the railroad tracks, and the snake never calls him, because the snake hasn't called him back for weeks now. It's raining. Big shock there. Still, it's better than the slush and grime of Manhattan. The Pacific Northwest is one of his favorite parts of the country; he's known that ever since his time with the monks.

His broken vows are heavy in his mind, on his tongue, as he runs. Yeah. Fucked those up right good. But hey, the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. (Or the one.) Maybe he can be a Vulcan Zen Buddhist.

Snake's pulled him off the electronic-intrusion gig full-time, which is annoying. He'd been enjoying it. (Mostly.) But the snake says that since he did such a *good job* with the acquisition negotiations (makes him feel like a fucking puppy being patted on the head; he grits his teeth) that he can follow up with it, while he starts looking for other companies that might be a 'good fit' for Farrow-Marshall to acquire. Untraceably, the snake says. Doesn't say anything more about what *kind* of companies.

Another test. (Everything's a test.) He grits his teeth more and starts doing what he can to assemble lists of the companies that contract with the SGC. Recommends five or six others, from minor suppliers to major subsidiaries. The snake seems pleased. Gives him three forensic accountants on-call to help him put together plans for doing it undetected; he doesn't have enough experience to make it look good without the help, and the snake would find it suspicious if he did a halfassed job.

Circles within circles. Tests within tests. There's a part of him constantly turning over the old saying -- *if the devil ever succeeded in replacing God, he would find he would have to assume the attributes of divinity* -- and knowing that it works in reverse. Working wholeheartedly in Ba'al's best interests makes tactical sense, even if it makes him feel like he's committing murder of a different kind. Murder of an idea, maybe. An ideal. But it's not just a case of pride in his craft (always his downfall) that has him closing all the loopholes; this *is* still a test, and always will be, for as long as he's here, and he's the one playing both ends against the middle.

All it takes is one slip and he's fucked.

So. He'll play the snake's game, do the snake's bidding. And trust that O'Neill is smart enough to follow, and smart enough to keep his hands off.

Right now, he'd give just about anything to be able to chance one fucking phone call out, to hear a friendly voice. Not to Mitchell. (*Don't think about Mitchell*, and he's been under for eight fucking weeks and he still has to tell himself that six times a day, and every time he does it threatens to overwhelm him with the thoughts of everything he's betrayed. Five minutes wouldn't be enough to deal with it. A lifetime isn't going to be enough.) But there are two people in the world he trusts beyond all else -- yes, even now -- and Mitchell's only one of them, and the other one is a man who can't look at him without thinking what-if, what-else, what-next.

O'Neill would still take the call. But he can't make it. O'Neill's still being watched. And the snake might have called off his own tail, but he knows better than to think the snake's cancelled the electronic surveillance. They've got protocols for how to make contact, and just picking up the phone and dialing without any precautions isn't on the list.

What's pissing him off is how none of this makes *sense*. That the snake should want to conquer Earth: sure, he'll buy that. Better bad guys have tried. That the snake should want to do it under-the-table, clandestinely: okay, maybe. But this is a hell of a lot of effort for (what he can only see as) minimal short-term reward, and he just can't fucking figure out what the hell game the snake is playing. Cloak-and-dagger isn't a snake thing. The fuckers are over-the-top. Gaudy. Ostentatious. All flash, no substance; not a single one of them would recognize subtle if you hit them in the face with it.

All flash, no substance: Ba'al isn't. And that worries the ever-living hell out of him, because he'd been willing to stake the fate of Earth on his being able to figure out the plans of any damn snake, given sufficient points of data, and he just flat-out can't put together this one.

He's starting to wonder if control of Earth might not be the snake's final endgame after all. It's somehow not comforting at all to think that the subjugation of your entire planet is just a single milestone in a larger plan.

Eight weeks in. Eight weeks under. Winter's almost over; February is drawing to a close. They planned for six to nine months. Anything longer than that and he's going to start running head-first into (more) problems caused by insufficient data about what's happening on the other end of the deal: in Washington, at the SGC, in the galaxy at large. He's got passphrases by which to recognize a courier, if it should become vital, and he trusts O'Neill to get him intel on anything he desperately needs to know. If anything major changes, O'Neill will find some way to get it to him. But on an op like this, information always flows one-way unless it's an absolute emergency: from the inside out, because there's never any way to know if a courier contact is going to fuck the situation worse. He knows O'Neill knows it. They were the same person when they were students of that particular school.

But the longer this runs, the more fucked he's going to be anyway, because it's not just the big-picture details that build a best plan of action. It's everything. You never know when one tiny fact might make or break it all. (How many times has he seen Daniel pull six unconnected details out of long-term memory storage and put them together to save their asses from the fire?) Not knowing what's going on in the galaxy at large, as time goes on, is just going to leave him with an ever-increasing risk of accidentally doing the one thing that will cinch the snake's master plan without even realizing it. If he helps the snake, he wants to know he's doing it.

Maybe they've miscalculated. Maybe the snake doesn't have a master plan; maybe all it wants to do is make a shitload of money and live out its life in idle richness on the only planet in the galaxy that *doesn't* know what it is. Maybe it's setting all this up so it can launder offworld tech into Earth patents, to guarantee a steady supply of income. Maybe it's trying to lock down all the secondary support markets, use its influence to keep the program from ever going public to preserve that backwater idyllic bucolic paradise.

Maybe he's likely to strip himself naked, paint himself green, and stand in Pioneer Square as a human statue.

Still. He's really ready to go home. Already. (Still.) And he'd known before he came under that he wouldn't be able to come in from the cold until he was ready to topple Ba'al's empire and leave the snake dead behind him -- because the minute he walks out of here, Ba'al will know, and the fucking snake wouldn't have any compunctions about trying to destroy anything it could find of his life. So far, the snake hasn't gotten the idea of using Mitchell or his family as hostages of fortune. He's gone to great lengths to leave the impression that he just *doesn't give a shit* about them anymore: business partnership of convenience and a pity fuck on both ends of the deal, broken off now, not hurtful enough to want vengeance and not emotionally-connected enough to be used for leverage against him. It's held so far.

But if he checks out without salting the earth behind him, the snake's going to figure something else is up. And if the snake goes looking and finds him ensconced back safely in the loving bosom of Mitchell's family, nobody will be able to count the bodies.

Enough. *Don't fucking think about Mitchell anymore.*

Killing Ba'al isn't the problem. He could do it now, if he really wanted. He knows the SGC's developed a symbiote poison -- it's one of the possible exit strategies he and O'Neill have discussed, and the one he'll most likely settle on if he can come up with a plausible way to get some smuggled in. Couldn't bring any with him. Had to plan on living with everything out on display, the first few months at least, and getting caught with the poison would be a one-way ticket back to the little cell where down is up and up is down and this time there wouldn't even be Daniel there to keep him company. (Daniel wasn't there last time, either. Hallucination. Imagination. Nothing more.) But the snake's strong, and the snake's fast, and the snake's paranoid, but he's *good*. Damn good. And not even the snake can be on guard 24/7. He could find a way.

What he doesn't want to do is kill Ba'al and then find out that it didn't change shit, and he'd accidentally gotten rid of the one person -- snake -- who knew all the bits of the master plan.

So he runs an extra mile, an extra two miles, his knuckles still aching from his time with the punching bag this morning. (*Buddham saranam gacchami, dhammam saranam gacchami, sangham saranam gacchami -- form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form, form is exactly emptiness, emptiness exactly form --*) Stops for coffee. Orders his usual, for him and for the snake. Second number odd, and he doesn't worry that none of the baristas look particularly glad to see him back, because he still doesn't want to know which one's his actual contact, and he'd made sure to signal before he dropped off the grid for that week in Manhattan. And he goes, step-step-step, up to deliver the coffee and figure out what the snake wants him to do today, and he pushes everything else out of the way and goes to be a good little minion.

No turning back now.

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iii. march

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ISDPR HIACE KJDKF SWCPA BXYRZ SZHVI RHLGM KLTGZ JUXYV ZWDMA LNMTY  
SDPRM YLQSG AISRZ ZOXYQ IZRFY IBSOY LEAUK FUKQL FYKUH QDCEN SNBZO  
UGKRW MUINC HGEWJ ULXOD WUZQV EKGHN SPXCN HDQAR EBNZV REJZN TXIXC  
PFXOF JJJGC PXAQH YIVLR GNHNS HQSSX GCLVY YUWCP SZHQZ HRJGE GMEOU  
SEKXW XSELJ NFMGX XEZNL QZHHE NZXTQ SIQIQ STMPA CMBNN GDTYH EAUH

OAWVJ GPXQP WEZRA GQPDG LLVCJ JUOHV PPQSB WGS DR MOCMJ YBJXM WANFJ  
OCVQH KHJDF OPYIN NNDED SFDYD TURFK RMHAG QGVWK CEVGY CJXSS EJJYA  
VDSOJ TAUKE OSPCM QZYDP HXLCO PQFNE EIAJS FKHUY DNJWH XMGFV AIMVQ  
UAVDZ URDTT WIDWG VAGOD BVOFJ ROMDF NTEHP KNIIH ESZBL CSTRK SILBF  
AZYWX SALRE MSGFE DAKZW WWTNB TMIBL JUKTT KOYWI GANKB XXZTD UWGKJ

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forced to, for verisimilitude, apply myself wholeheartedly to the acquisition and suborning of companies contracted to provide goods and services to the sgc.

a full listing of companies and subsidiaries of fmi can be found in appendix c. in particular, please note that the list is far longer than analysts were previously able to assemble. appendix d contains a full listing of the companies and contractors i worked with in my tenure, caused to have agents of farrow-marshall placed in by my efforts, or became aware were being controlled or operated by agents or subsidiaries of fmi. for a listing of key names and alternate identities of major players in those companies, see appendix e, correlated and cross-referenced both alphabetically and by amount of involvement. (those individuals for whom i have documentary evidence of malfeasance are marked by \* and that evidence has been provided to my control. while i can provide testimony against all individuals in the first three columns, i recognize that introducing my testimony into court, even a closed military tribunal, will perhaps create more problems than it will solve.)

during this time, while gathering such evidence, i of course continued in my efforts to persuade ba'al that i could be trusted. when my efforts bore fruit in early march, i immediately made my first report to my contact in the department of homeworld security, which is attached, in decrypted form. to elaborate upon

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"Such a good boy," the snake croons in his ear, its hands moving over his skin like it has a right to touch, and that's it, he's had enough, right then and there.

He's fast. The snake's faster. But it wasn't expecting him to move, and he has plenty of experience in going from zero to choke-hold without giving a warning by tensing up his muscles in advance. Couldn't do serious damage this way, of course. He's not trying to. Just sending a message.

The snake doesn't fight back as he flips it over and pushes it into the sheets with a hand on its throat. Just smiles up at him, all teeth and lips and tongue.

"I'm letting you fuck me," he snarls. "That doesn't mean I'm anyone's boy."

He's expecting some kind of fight. What he's not expecting is the way the snake laughs, full and open. Its vocal cords buzz under his palms. "I was wondering how long it would take you to object," it says, and he gets the sudden impression that this whole thing has been *another fucking test*.

Then it flips him away, full strength, as casual as a human would swat at a mosquito.

He goes flying. Off the bed, across the room, coming down hard, his head slamming against the wall, and *hereally fucking hates that part*. He bounces back up as fast as he can, tasting blood in his mouth, crouched for bear, ready to make this his own personal naked Waterloo if he has to. If the snake has decided he's too much trouble and has decided it's time to put an end to his pretense of being an independent agent. He'll fight the damn symbiote to the death if he has to -- even if death is likely to be a temporary condition around here -- but he'd really prefer not being in that position in the first place.

But the snake's still laughing, and as he watches, it rolls over and picks up the earpiece and phone it had thrown on the nightstand when it had undressed. (He's still got his own earpiece in his ear. The instant he realizes, it's suddenly heavier than naquadah.) "Come on in," it says, to whoever's on the other end of the line. "Our little kitten has decided to show his teeth. Time to give him the next piece."

Pisses him off enough (scares him enough) that he doesn't even flip out when the door opens up and another two bodies, identical to Ba'al, walk straight in. One of them smiles at him. "Surprise," it says, bright and cheerful.

He turns his head and spits blood onto the lush cream of the snake's penthouse carpet. "This some kind of joke?" he rasps. (Knows it's not. Knows it can't be.)

The snake in the bed laughs again. Gets up and pulls on the pair of pants it left lying tangled next to the bed. Yeah, having copies of yourself in the room is a real fucking mood-killer. "No joke, Jack," it says. "Come. We have a great deal to talk about."

No fucking shit.

\*

So, there's more than one snake running around.

They don't tell him much. That there are multiple copies: obviously. That they switch back and forth depending on circumstance and whimsy. That they've decided he's trustworthy enough to be made aware of these facts, since there are times it would have been useful for him to know. (He can't think of any. Not so far, at least. He puts it on the list of things to think about later and schools his face to immobility.)

Explains a lot. Explains why the snake's reactions, their interactions, have seemed so scattershot. He's probably dealt with all of them, at one time or another. Snake won't tell him how many there actually are. (More than ten, he thinks, listening to the way they talk about it. Less than fifty. Small mercies. An unlimited supply of Ba'als -- yeah, his head's trying to feed him sixteen damn puns and now is *not the fucking time* -- would spell disaster.) He wonders whether the fact that some of them are copies contributed at all to Ba'al's willingness to believe his own motivations.

He wonders how many of them have fucked him.

Can't tell. No way to know.

*This* is important enough to use up a drop-box on. *Carefully*; if *he* were the snake, he'd step up the surveillance on himself after giving away such a major piece of things, so he has to assume the snake's done the same. He waits a week just to be sure.

He boils the essence of the message down as far as he can get it, then strips it further. Pulls out conjunctions, prepositions. Pulls out subjects. Pulls out vowels. Introduces some deliberate misspellings, makes sure he doesn't repeat words. The cipher he's using isn't weak against frequency analysis, but he and O'Neill both remember the days when an abundance of "e"s and "of"s might fuck you. Does it all in his head. The plaintext doesn't get written down anywhere. When he's done, he has a stream of about 280 characters to encipher, and it takes him three of the most nervous days he can remember for a long time back.

He works in public bathrooms, mostly: over his lunch breaks, stopping on his morning run, on the evenings the snake (snakes) doesn't want him to spread his legs and smile pretty. Nerves jittering the entire time. He's been carrying the deck of cards in his pockets on and off -- if the snake asks, it's for dexterity practice, and he's got a triple dozen card tricks he can show off on command -- so *that's* not as suspicious as it could be. But the ciphertext is too complex to memorize on-the-fly, and that means he has to write the output stream down.

Doesn't have the worksheet hidden. Hidden things raise suspicion. He hides in plain sight, writing down the ciphertext character-by-character on receipts and on the backs of business cards, all shoved in his wallet any-which-way. This is the part he absolutely can't risk-mitigate any further; if the snake searches him, or has someone search him, while he's got five-letter code-groups scrawled across everything he owns, he's sunk.

He's lucky. (He hopes.) The snake's given up searching his stuff, or having people searching his stuff. (He hopes.) And once he's done, that day at lunch (in the bathroom of the Red Robin) he copies the message onto a single post-it note (left to right, bottom to top -- every extra layer helps). Folds the post-it in half onto itself. Burns and flushes all the pieces of his worksheet.

On his way out, he buys a milkshake to bring the snake. Chocolate. (The snake hates chocolate.)

That night, as he's leaving, he heads over to the Happy Hacker Haven (and once again makes a mental note to steal the chair from his old desk -- the one in the office the snake has him in now sucks ass, and he keeps forgetting to make the swap before anyone comes in in the morning) and kicks Virta's chair until Virta pushes off his headphones. "You, me, Trinity, nine o'clock," he says. "Could use a night out."

Virta blinks at him a couple of times. He hasn't exactly gone out of his way to *avoid* Virta for the past two weeks, but he hasn't gone out of his way to be all buddy-buddy, either. But Virta's been his cover once before; he can use the kid again. "Sure," Virta says. "Meet you there."

He tells the snake (snakes) he's taking the night off, goes back to his apartment, and changes into his very best jailbait chic -- the skintight shirt, the worn and spraypainted jeans, the eyeliner. Meets Virta outside the club. (Kid cleans up pretty nice, and the look he gets when Virta sees his getup is gratifying.) Place is packed. He can't make a tail, and he's *pretty* sure anyone the snake could get to tail him would stand out like a sore thumb in a crowd like this.

Dancing the way he does it these days is close enough to cockteasing to begin with. Doesn't take much effort to pull it along that half-step farther. Virta's even the one to suggest the alleyway, which saves him the trouble. "Yeah," he agrees -- breathless, sweaty -- when Virta proposes it. "I'll go first. Count five minutes. Then come after."

Anyone looking at him would think he's making sure nobody's watching him because he doesn't want to get caught sucking dick in a dirty alleyway.

Out the back door. Into the alley. The post-it note, in the tiny ziplock that could be mistaken for a dime bag, gets taped to the back of the dumpster. Less than thirty seconds' work. When Virta comes slinking outside four and a half minutes later, he's doing his best impression of not having a thing on his mind but what he's about to do.

A couple of people smirk, knowingly, seeing the wet and muddy patches down the knees of his jeans when they slip back into the club. He ignores them.

Next morning, he drops a five in the tip jar and prays the message will make it through. O'Neill will figure out the best way to use it. The best time to use it. If he should use it. He'd cautioned O'Neill against acting on the information, because it will blow his cover from hell to gone if O'Neill lets his knowledge filter back to the snake's ears. He has to trust that O'Neill knows what he's doing. His job isn't long-term strategy. His job is just to find this shit out, and to blow the doors behind him when he goes. Just Call Me SG-1's Undercover Payload.

\*

It isn't until four days after he makes the drop that his brain finally fucking kicks in and he realizes *just how fucking fucked he is*. There's no way he'll ever be able to know how many Ba'als there are. Or *where* they are. Or if any of them are in New York or China or *fucking offworld* at any given time. And if he misses so much as one of them when he makes his final play, this whole merry-go-round starts up again. With Ba'al knowing the score. With Ba'al aware of the betrayal.

*Fuck.*

\*

*Up the airy mountain, down the rushy glen, we daren't go a-hunting for fear of little men --*

Downtown Seattle. No acronyms today. Too busy thinking. His steps lull his mind into throwing out bits and snatches of poetry at him, rhythmic like his footfalls, soothing even though his mind refuses to be soothed. He's got company. (*Wee folk, good folk, trooping all together, green jacket, red cap, white owl's feather --*)

It's second nature by now to scan the crowds around him -- looking for additional familiar faces, looking for following cars, looking for some sign that he's being watched -- but he doesn't find anything. Wasn't really expecting it. He's pretty sure all the secondary surveillance on him has been pulled. Or at least dropped down to the same level everyone else on the executive level lives with. He's been careful not to change his behavior in any way; the key to avoiding discovery is to avoid suspicion. On stage, constantly, nonstop for three months. He's starting to live for the few minutes here and there where he can duck into some random place along the way, stand in the bathroom for a minute alone and unwatched, and just *breathe*.

*Get a grip, Jack, he tells himself. Biggest danger in all of this isn't that you'll get caught. Biggest danger in all of this is that you'll crack up.*

Takes him a second to realize he's called himself Jack. *Fuck. Fuck.* Bad fucking sign. Even worse if it's not just because it's what the snake calls him.

*(High upon the hill-top the old king sits; he is now so old and grey, he's nigh lost his wits --)*

The snake's driving him crazy. It isn't that he expects it to have logical, rational, sensible responses: it's a snake. Snakes aren't logical. But the snakes *are* creatures of self-interest -- and not even enlightened self-interest; it's a gimme gimme gimme now now now mentality that involves an irrational megalomania. And for a race that has lifespans in the millennia, they display a distinct lack of long-term planning ability. Conquer the world *now*; tea and crumpets later. You can almost always count on a snake to go for the quick win over the long haul; he's seen it happen a hundred times, where one of the System Lords will make *astupid* power play instead of just having some goddamn patience for a while and letting something sit.

Stipulate that worldview, and there's not a single goddamn part of this that makes sense.

Snakes don't share power. With *anyone*. And yet Ba'al has divided its powerbase. He's seen up to three of them in the room at the same time; he *still* doesn't know how many more there are. Snakes go for the quick power grab. Ba'al has a plan here, and that plan hasn't become obvious yet. He's been here for ten weeks. After ten weeks, he should be able to make a guess at what the snake's up to. He can't. Nothing adds up. And that means that the payoff is so far in the future that whatever the snake's doing *now* is only groundwork.

Which means it's larger than Earth. Has to be.

And snakes don't do subtle, and yet Ba'al has shown signs of cunning and craft since minute one. Snakes don't *persuade* cooperation out of people; Ba'al has been all-but-fucking-*courting* him in every single conversation they've had since it (they) went for the Big Reveal.

It's been two weeks since the snake decided to pull back the curtain, and he's only *now* realizing what the nagging itchy feeling in

the back of his head -- in the place where he always feels it when there's something so subtle and *off* -- is telling him. There is a non-zero, non-negligible chance (growing larger with each additional piece of information he adds to the picture) that he has made a terrible, awful miscalculation, compounded over and over with every step deeper he goes.

*(They stole little Bridget for seven years long; when she came down again her friends were all gone; they took her lightly back between the night and morrow; they thought she was fast asleep, but she was dead with sorrow --)*

And this entire fucking house of cards turns on his being able to handle anything that turns up, and he's staked everything -- everything he has, everything he knows, everything he's ever loved and everyone who's ever loved him back -- on his word to O'Neill: *I can do the job.*

He's starting to suspect he doesn't even know what the job is.

He's been watching. Now that he's watching, now that he knows the real deal, a hundred little details are starting to come clear. The Ba'al-clones aren't identical. Close to it, but if he's looking, he can spot the differences. He's started to name them. Ease of separation. Alpha has a few more frown lines around the eyes. India is the one that always deals with tech problems. Echo and Foxtrot are the ones that handle interacting with people who don't know that the boss is a snake. (Foxtrot likes to go for the jugular, savaging stupid people who ask stupid questions with a dagger of verbal acuity that he almost has to admire. Echo's the one with the sense of humor; he thinks it's the one -- one of the ones -- that laughs at his jokes.)

Delta's the one that's joined him for his morning run the past three days in a row.

Up the airy mountain, down the rushy glen. Or over the hills and through the woods, to the University of Washington we go, at least. Perfect step, perfect unison. Makes him want to fumble, stumble, hold back that fraction of a second necessary to make the snake break step with him. He doesn't. But every time he catches the snake out of the corner of his eye, it's like the choke chain tightens around his throat a little more.

The only mercy is that the snake doesn't ever look over at him. Doesn't say a word. Just paces him perfectly, step by step, loping easily along the streets beside him. Its white t-shirt is damp with sweat, and it's breathing just as hard as he is, but he knows -- *knows* -- it's all an act. A shadow-play of aping human. Little details. Verisimilitude's a bitch. Delta's better at it than any of the rest. Looking back at things, he's pretty sure that the few moments he's suffered the worst cognitive-disconnect illusions (blink and it's a snake; blink again and it's a man) have been when he's sitting across from Delta. He's not sure what that means.

*(...they have planted thorn trees, for pleasure here and there; is any man so daring as dig them up in spite of he shall find the thornies set in his bed at night...)*

Three mornings running, they've waited in line silently together, parted outside the coffee shop. Today, he jerks his chin at the cappuccino Delta holds. "I'm not bringing a dozen of those every morning now, you know."

He's hoping to get some sort of reaction from the snake, some confirmation or denial -- is a dozen too high? Too low? -- but the snake only smiles. The expression doesn't sit badly on its face. Which sits badly in his stomach. "No," it agrees. "Let them find their own." It raises the coffee cup: salute, acknowledgment. Does it every morning, just before it walks away. "As always, thank you for allowing me to share your morning insanity."

He stops himself from folding his free hand into a fist. "I got any other choice?"

The snake looks surprised. "Of course you do. If you would prefer to be alone, you have only but to say so."

Yeah. Say so and all but prove to the snake that he's up to something. No thanks. Still, he can't resist the dig. "No. But you could have asked first."

The snake nods, its face calm. Considering. Like he's just given it a piece to a puzzle. "I'll remember that in the future. Have a good morning."

It turns away. Leaves him standing on the sidewalk, the wind blowing against his skin. Something makes him shiver.

The wind. It's just the wind. His skin is wet with sweat and morning mist, and the cold is reaching his bones.

It's getting easier to lie to himself. That should probably worry him more than it does.

\*

Snake shows up in his office that night just around quitting time. It waits with one shoulder leaning against the doorjamb until he finishes up the email he's sending Forensic Accountant #2 (sometimes it's fun to eviscerate stupid people without once using a single word he couldn't have used in front of his mother), so it doesn't interrupt his train of thought. Manners from a snake. Who'd've think it.

He doesn't look up until he finishes. *(on the other hand, if you'd really like to shoot yourself in the foot, i can't stop you; feel free. just aim away from me when you do it, and i'm not cleaning up the blood afterwards. --jdn)* "The fuck you want?" he asks. "Or did you just come over to vulture in my doorway?"

The snake's watching him like he's the most fascinating thing to cross its radar in months. It's wearing a different tie than the one he's been dealing with all day. Only subtly different; he's the only one who'd notice. "I have come to enquire of your availability for the evening," it says. High court manners. Sounds like it might be translating from Goa'uld in its head before it talks. (Echo of an echo, Daniel lecturing about mode and modality, about a language that evolves layer upon layer of manners to cover the fact the society has none. Shove it aside.) "Rather than assuming that my presence would be welcomed. I have reservations; should you choose to accompany me, I would be gratified by your company. You've been working quite hard for the past few weeks."

The prospect of the snake actually seeming to give a shit about whether or not he's getting enough *downtime* is almost enough to make him crack up laughing right then and there, because if he doesn't crack up, he might throw the fucking snake out the fucking window and that's nobody's idea of a good time. (Well. It's his. But not yet.) He presses his lips together and locks his workstation, quick flick of hands over keyboard, before rotating in the office chair and giving the snake the hairy eyeball. "Oh, sure," he says. "Let me put on my fucking dancing shoes."

It's Delta. Gotta be. Because it smiles at him, and the sick feeling in his stomach -- like a fish flapping on the sidewalk, dying for want of air -- comes from the way the smile still doesn't look wrong in the least. "Eight o'clock," it says. "I shall call on you at seven-thirty."

So that's how he fucking ends up at Seattle's fucking hottest gourmet restaurant, having a fucking nine-course fucking meal with

a fucking snake sitting across from him and smiling over its fucking wine.

Worst fucking part of it is, the fucking snake actually seems to be enjoying itself.

No, the snake *is* enjoying itself. Lingering over each taste, savoring the flavors, eyes slitting shut in bliss. It turns his stomach. He pretends he's enjoying himself anyway. The snake's a perfect fucking gentleman. Orders for both of them. Different tasting menus for each. He thinks the snake just wanted a wider variety to sample; it's eaten half his meal too.

Food's fabulous. He doesn't taste a fucking bite he puts in his fucking mouth.

"It's the small pleasures in life, isn't it?" the snake says, out of nowhere, savoring the Syrah paired with the main course. "Good food. Good wine. Impossible to find, where I come from, and so many people don't value them at all."

He opens his mouth to say something. Then he closes it again. The snake's staring at him, eyes boring into his face, like it's trying to send him a fucking message.

"Some people?" he says. Because the snake can't possibly mean what he thinks the snake means.

"Our mutual acquaintances, shall we say," the snake says. Reaches across the table and steals another bite off his plate. "I never fail to find it fascinating how such *similar* people can develop such different outlooks."

Different glass of wine with every course, and he's just been letting the wine touch his lips and setting the glasses down again, because the last fucking thing he needs is to be functioning at anything less than full throttle. High and dry, metaphorical fish back in the pit of his belly, flapping around on the concrete, didn't notice the water until all of a sudden it wasn't wet because the fucking snake is trying to fucking tell him something and he doesn't, *can't*, believe.

No. It's a test. Another one. Last one, maybe.

He puts his fork down. "I don't know," he says. Sounding casual. Anything but. "Never really noticed a difference myself."

The snake's lips curve. Optical illusions fool the brain into thinking there's something there that really isn't: tiny perceptual cues, blink and they're gone. Fool-the-eye, fool-the-brain. Blink and there's a snake across the table from you. Blink again and it's a man, calm and patient, giving you a clue you don't want to let your brain believe. "I know," it says. (He says. *It* says.) "Perhaps you might find it illuminating if you begin to look, Jonathan. You're more perceptive than some people might believe."

By the time dessert arrives, he's beginning to regret having eaten anything at all.

\*

He lets the snake into his apartment when they get back, because he's pretty sure that's what he's expected to do, and goes away inside his head for a while when the snake takes him up on the offer. Just a body. That's all. Nothing more.

Someone in the bed with him when he wakes up. Middle of the night. Breathing: soft, even. No matter how much he tries to hold himself still, he always gives himself away. Sooner or later. (A twitch. A change in breathing. *Something*, and he doesn't let himself think about it, because if he gives himself away here, he's been giving himself away day after day, action after action, breath after breath.) Tonight's no different. He can feel the snake watching him, in the darkness, in the depths of his despair.

Neither one of them says a word. But the snake puts a hand on his chest, fingertips resting lightly on the crowned inverted V (*home*) tattooed just beneath the hollow of his throat, and traces it, once. Perfectly placed in the darkness. Snake can see in this light, even if he can't. His skin crawls, like hundreds of tiny spiders are hatching underneath and trying to crawl out.

Then the snake's fingers slide left, along his collarbone, over the lines where the sentences of promise and reminder are engraved. And it writes over them, slow and precise, stopping after every letter so he can translate motion to meaning:

*T-R-U-S-T-M-E*

He grabs its hand as it finishes the last stroke of the E. Holds it for a minute, in midair: a confirmation, a warning. *Message received.*

He doesn't let himself sleep again.

\*

Downtown fucking Seattle: Junior Commandos Meet Some Uncomfortable Propositions. Yeah. Lame one. Sue him. Game's not fun anymore. Maybe it never was.

Saturday morning.

Can't deviate from his usual weekend routine too far, but this won't call down the hounds of hell: sweats and a t-shirt, old, ragged, pair of running shoes laced up tight. Today he runs all the way out to the fucking airport. Snake doesn't join him. Small fucking mercy. Maybe it's waiting for an engraved invitation.

Half a marathon there. Half a marathon back. He's been running for so fucking long. Never fast enough. Never far enough. His life has narrowed down to downtown fucking Seattle and expanded to encompass a whole fucking planet beyond, and all it takes is one missed step and it's a hell of a fucking long way down.

Fact: The snake comes in sixpacks. Fact: One of them has told him they don't present a unified front. Fact: One of them has told him, by statement and by implication, that there's dissension in the ranks. Fact: One of them has hinted at the possibility of an alliance.

Fact: One of them has reason to believe that he isn't what he's pretending to be.

Corollary: Where one can arrive at this conclusion, others can. Conjecture: Test. Trap. He's expected to go running to one of the others (but which one?) and spill his guts and they're waiting to see whether he does or not. Possible? Highly. Likely? Who knows.

Fact: He still doesn't know what the fucking snake's plans are. What it wants. What it's here for. What it's trying to do. Absence of information means that he's reasoning from insufficient data; every model he tries to build falls apart the minute he tries to take it out of the theory-box and apply it to empirical evidence. Fact: This fucking snake behaves differently than all the other Goa'uld he has ever encountered and fought and killed. (*Ma nishtanah hanachash haze mikol hanechashim?*) Fact: Any model of behavior he's managed to construct falls to hell when he accepts the premise that he's been dealing with a plurality and not a singularity and he

has no fucking idea how much cross-communication they have.

Conjecture: The snake's telling the truth; one of the army-of-me has a little more 'enlightened' in the primordial ooze of 'enlightened self-interest' than the others do, has found its little niche and wants to stick with it. Been taken up unto a high mountain and shown all the earthly delights of the world. Has decided that whatever plan the rest of the gang is putting into place will disrupt its wining and dining and whoring around, wants to preserve hot dogs and apple pie and the Constitutional right to fuck anyone it wants without having to worry about a slave uprising and an interruption in the high-roller lifestyle. Possible? Maybe. Likely? Who knows.

Fact: He has not yet had a snake shoved in his own head, which means the plurality consensus is that he'll be more useful without it. Fact: He was not apprised of the next layer of facts until after he displayed resistance sufficient to convince the snake (and he wishes like burning that he knew *which fucking snake he'd been fucking at that point*) that he was displaying cooperation, but not capitulation. Fact: the snake laughs at him every time he bares tooth and claw and fights back.

Conjectures: The snake finds him cute. The snake likes his spirit. The snake knows it can counter any move he makes. The snake doesn't care about whatever move he makes, because there's nothing he can do to fuck things up. The snake collective can't decide what the fuck to do about him. The snake's waiting to see what he does next.

Conjecture: The snake needs him walking around, independent and uncontrolled, for some step in the fucking plan.

Conjecture: The snake knows that at least two people in-or-near the SGC have built-in snake-detectors, and they're two of the people who'd stand ready to blow the whistle, and the snake wants someone to be able to get up close and personal without ringing the alarm. Someone who'd already be known to them. (Fact: He's told the snake he still knows Carter. Has seen Teal'c. Full disclosure; they're facts anyone could discover with a little bit of digging, and the way to avoid having the cops charge you is to come up with a valid reason for your DNA to be at the crime scene, and the way to avoid the snake thinking you're a fucking sleeper agent is to come up with a valid reason for you to be pissed off at the people who left you behind.) Fact: He's been the snake's hitman once already, without blinking. Conjecture: The snake might want him to do it again.

Conjecture: The snake might know about the symbiote poison, might need a fully-briefed operative to carry and use it. (Conjecture, likely fact: The snake suspects his Tok'ra issues. Conjecture, likely fact: Whatever plan the snake's planning is galactic, and the snake's taking the long view of things, and it knows it's going to have to deal with the Tok'ra thorn in the lion's paw sooner or later.)

Fact: He is being played *at least* as much as he's doing the playing, and he doesn't know what the fucking game is, but he knows what the fucking stakes are. All he has to do is fuck up once, just once, and he's toast. Snake's got all the cards.

Fact: One of the snakes has extended the olive-branch of alliance. And trusting a snake is *not* on the table, no way nohow, but right now he'd give his fucking eyeteeth to know how the Tok'ra woke up to being Tok'ra, because he trusts the Tok'ra about as far as he can fucking *throw* them, but the fact is a fact however little he likes it: if it happened once, he *must* entertain the possibility it could have happened again.

Possible? Yeah. Likely? Who the *fucking fuck* knows.

Fact: He has been provided an ever-growing set of insights into the Ba'al-collective's actions. Conjecture: The snake's bought his story, hook line and sinker, and wants to use what he's got on offer. Counter-conjecture, equally likely: The snake doesn't believe him for a minute, and is lending him more rope and waiting to see when he hangs himself. Counter-counter-conjecture, equally likely: half the collective believes him, half the collective doesn't. (Open question, unanswerable: which side does the one he's tailspinning over fall on?)

Fact: He has two options here. Grass on the snake or don't. If it's a test, he'll pass it by ratting. If it's legit, he'll be screwing himself out of an opportunity if he does. If it's a test, and he answers opening move with opening move, does or says anything to make the snake think he's not a loyal minion, he's sunk. If it's legit, and he takes the chance, he'll have doors open for him it might take months to even *find*, otherwise.

He has always fucking hated game theory.

Fact: These fucking facts fucking suck.

\*

Conclusion: answer tentative and noncommittal groundwork with tentative and noncommittal groundwork, giving away nothing, making sure everything he does has two or three or ten different interpretations. And if it's a test, and the fucking snake calls him on it, claim he was leading the 'traitor' on to see what it would do and how much solid information he could lure it into revealing before figuring out the best way to bring it down. Didn't tell you straight off because I wanted to bring you a present. Like a cat mousing a mostly-dead bird, bringing it in to spit it at its master's feet. Optimal solution yes, ideal solution no, but he's starting to forget what his ideals even were and there's no way to tell anymore which end is up.

He realizes he's tasting blood when he drags his limp-kneed and exhausted body back into the apartment. Chewing on the inside of his cheek again.

Has to stop that. Stone-cold fucking tell.

\*

Ressler-fucking-Szdinski is giving him a fucking migraine. The deal's nearly solid, but their board of directors is giving him shit about one of the provisions he really fucking wants in the final contract -- the ability to hand the CEO a golden parachute the minute the ink is fucking dry and put in a handpicked replacement. (He's got six candidates so far. None of them a perfect choice, either for his own interests or the snake's. He'll let the snake decide when he drops the deal in the snake's lap.)

He's still not sure how he wound up in charge of this shit, but hey, it's what the snake wants him doing. Price for fucking competence indeed. If he has to spend one more fucking day on the phone for nine hours straight, he's going to fucking shoot something. (Still better than what else the snake could have had him doing.)

He's standing in front of his office windows (floor-to-ceiling, like the snake's; everyone on the executive team has a fabulous fucking view) and arguing with his counterpart over at Ressler-fucking-Szdinski, when Virta wanders in and makes himself at home in the visitor chair.

Can't cover the earpiece to keep his voice from being picked up when it transmits the sound through bone conduction, and he can't actually remember where he left the actual *phone* so he can mute it, so all he can do is wave Virta to silence. "Come on, Barry,"

he says, out loud. "I might only have to shave twice a week, but I was *not* born fucking yesterday, okay? Don't insult me. We're signing papers next week come hell or high water, and my clauses had better be in there. Don't make me have to threaten you."

It takes another fifteen minutes before he can chivvy the guy off the phone (having extracted a promise to send back the emended contract in email by close of business) and turn back to Virta. Virta's sitting sideways in the chair, his knees hooked over one arm, watching him. "You have no idea how fucking hot it is when you do that," he says.

As fuck-buddies go, Virta's not bad. Low-pressure. Safety valve. Doesn't cling, but doesn't hesitate to proposition, either. And that's a proposition. He wonders if the snake's going to have plans for him tonight; he could use a chance to get away from things for a while. Ten fucking minutes where he doesn't have to worry about what role he's playing. (A chance to *sleep*. He hasn't, not in longer than he'd care to think about. Not properly, at least.)

Still doesn't mean he wants to bring it into the office. Doesn't *think* the snake's the jealous type -- kind of hard to be when there's multiples of you fucking the same guy -- but still. Tacky. He crosses the floor, away from the window, and sits back down at his desk. Eyes giving a warning: *not here. Later.*

"You want something?" he asks.

"Coffee run," Virta says. "Gonna punch Suzukimo in the fucking nose if I don't get the hell out of here. Figured I'd come over and see if you wanted to come, since we haven't seen much of you since you got moved. I think I might have something with that system you cracked and I thought you might like the update. You got the time?"

He hesitates. "I really don't," he says, but knowing how far the Wunderkinder have gotten with Groom Lake's system would be nice. So he sighs. "But yeah. Hang on." He locks his workstation, spins around. Grabs his hoodie. "You're buying."

They talk of nothing of consequence in the elevator and all the way over to the coffee shop -- net neutrality, copyright legislation, the latest update to the Storm botnet. Virta's got shit taste in coffee; he picks some froofy frozen thing. At least it has a shot of espresso. He goes for a peppermint latte -- if he stays here long enough he's going to get addicted to the damn things. It's habit, nothing more, that has him picking out a bill and folding it, dropping it in the tip-jar, arranging the others in his wallet so they're properly organized; he made his real check-in that morning, after his run, the same way he always does.

"So what's up?" he finally asks, when they've both got their drinks and are standing in the mill and push of people on the sidewalk outside the coffeeshop. Virta doesn't seem to be interested in going anywhere, just leans his shoulders back against the shop's window and props one foot up against the plate glass, sipping from his straw. It's a nice-ish day, or at least not actively raining; maybe Virta just wants to get some fresh air.

"Not much," Virta says. "Got back in a couple of times, same route you used. Nobody seems to have noticed. Those core dumps you managed to capture were gone the next time we got in, but we've been going over them for the past couple of weeks. Not much there. Right now I'm thinking we *might* be able to replace /bin/login with our own version and still have it pass the md5 checksum test; that's where we've been putting most of our effort lately."

"Huh," he says. It's not *impossible* -- md5 has been known vulnerable since '04 or so, and some bright boy turned it from theoretical abstract to proof-of-concept last year -- but it'd be fucking tough. Not the route he knows Carter designed for them to take, but it's all right; all the logins to the honeypot are under Carter's control and she makes damn sure none of them have the same passwords as any other account on any of the real systems. Still. It's good thinking. "You sure they're still using md5 and not SHA? My intel's four years out of date."

"Pretty sure, yeah," Virta says. "Anyway, that's not what I wanted to talk about." He reaches into a pocket, pulls out a thumb drive. Hands it over. "Been getting some more data every time we check back in. Here's the latest tarball. Some interesting stuff there."

"Yeah?" Habit has him dropping the thumb drive into his hoodie the second Virta hands it over; it's poor form to let the watchdogs see you accept a handoff, even if he doesn't think anyone's watching him too closely anymore. "What kind of interesting?"

Virta grins, eyes bright. (*The game's afoot.*) "Some reports from a guy at the company you're negotiating for. Apparently they're doing work with the target. Small world, huh?"

His blood runs cold. Last fucking thing he wants right now is for Virta to catch one whiff of the big picture, because Virta's got a hacker's curiosity and a hacker's lack of boundaries, with a black-hat's lack of moral compunctions to go with it. If Virta smells something fishy, he's going to keep *digging*. And if Virta keeps digging, he'll find things, and then they're all fucked, because Virta won't let it drop and he'll drag the rest of the Wunderkinder into the chase. And somehow he doesn't think the snake would hesitate to order him to make the problem *go away*.

"Probably a coincidence, but yeah, small world," he says. Keeps his voice even. "Those guys do placement for half the government agencies out there, though, so it's not *too* weird." *Come on, kid. Save your neck here. I'm giving you an out.*

"Yeah," Virta says. "Still, thought you'd get a kick out of that. You think you're ever gonna come back to us, or does the boss own your ass until the end of time?"

"Told you," he says, grateful for the change of subject. "Slave markets of Iskanderun. It's a fifty-year indenture. Come on, I'm embarrassed to be standing here with you while you're drinking that fucking thing."

They go up the elevator together, once they clear back through security. (He'd rather run the stairs, but Virta would fall over and die.) Virta follows him back into his office. For a minute he wonders if Virta's going to hang out all afternoon (which would be awkward; he's got other phone calls to make) but no, Virta only wants to finish up the argument they're having about which version of the song "Hallelujah" is better. (Leonard Cohen's. Hands down. The fact that Virta can muster arguments for any other version simply serves as more proof that Virta has no fucking taste.)

"You busy tonight?" Virta asks, halfway out the door. "I was thinking of going to catch a movie. 'The Bank Job' looks like it might be fun. If a little too close to work."

He hesitates. "I really can't," he says. It's been three days since the snake has come calling for him; he should probably go shake his ass at *one* of them tonight. "This weekend, maybe?"

Virta nods. "Sounds good. I'll email you." Sketches a salute. Turns to go. His voice comes trailing back from the hallway: "hey, boss."

A minute later, there's a snake in the doorway. (He closes his eyes for just a fraction of a second longer than a blink. He's about ready to *barricade the fucking door* to keep people from interrupting him.) "Yeah," he says. "Busy. Talk fast."



The snake's frowning. He doesn't like that expression. Means something's wrong. But at least the snake's not frowning *at him*; it's looking over its shoulder and frowning at where Virta disappeared down the hallway. (*Great*. So the snake *is* fucking jealous after all. Peachy-fucking-keen.)

It shakes off the frown fast enough, though, and turns back to him. "I have come to enquire of your availability this evening," it says, calm and formal.

Pit of his stomach turns over again. Fuck. Delta. Delta's been leaving him alone all week, giving him room. Giving him space. Letting him think things over. Looks like his fucking grace period has expired.

He can feel his jaw grinding. He forces himself to relax. "Think my dance card's free," he says. "Why, you feel like taking me out for a spin?"

The snake's lips quirk. Tiny little half-smile. Shouldn't be able to do that. Shouldn't be able to look so fucking human. "I would appreciate the pleasure of your company, yes," it says. "I shall come over after work."

It's like being asked out on a fucking *date*. "Whatever," he says, and turns. Unlocks his workstation. "Sounds fine. I really do have to kick you out now, though. I've got a call in five minutes I need to prep for."

He doesn't -- it's half an hour, not five minutes -- but it's not like the snake knows, one way or the other, and *hereally* can't handle dealing with any of them right now. (He thinks it says a lot about his current lot in life that dealing with fucking corporate-shark lawyers is the fucking *high point* of his day.)

Expects the snake to protest, but all it does is nod. "Break a leg," it says, and walks away.

Leaves him wanting to put his head down on the desk and just *breathe*. Snakes shouldn't know slang that well.

This one does.

What else does it know?

\*

He gets stuck on the phone with China that afternoon, working on the next deal he's trying to set up. Going through an interpreter makes him *fucking cranky*. (Never used to. That was before he worked with Daniel, who could *read his fucking mind*, who made the process so transparent he barely noticed he and his conversational partner weren't speaking the same language. Never told Daniel how much he appreciates him. Wishes he had. Can't be helped now.)

Snake's in his apartment when he finally gets home around 2030. Sitting on the couch. (From Swedish furniture, O St. Tyler, deliver us.) Wearing jeans and a plain black t-shirt, barefoot. It's got its feet up on the coffeetable, reading one of the books the decorator thought should belong in an apartment like this.

"Feet on the table," he says, slamming the door behind him. He pitches the thumb drive containing all the files he needs to read tonight -- for the fucking call at the crack of fucking dawn tomorrow morning -- across the room; the snake lifts a hand to catch it without even looking up from the book. Fucking snake.

"Yes," it says. "They are."

"Don't make the next thing I throw be a kitchen knife," he says, and stalks through the living room and into the bedroom.

Snake doesn't follow. Small mercies. He toes off his shoes, peels off his socks -- stepped in a puddle or twelve; they're soaked through -- strips off his jeans and t-shirt, wads them up and shoves them in the bottom of his closet. Pulls out a pair he hasn't been sweating in. Balls them up under his arm. Walks naked across the room, out of the bedroom, into the bathroom in the hallway. Snake doesn't look up. It annoys him; if he's going to be putting on a free floor show, the fucking snake should at least have the manners to watch it.

Shower's nice and hot. This building has good water pressure, at least, and he hasn't managed to run down the hot-water tank more than that once. Sometimes he tries. Never can. (Trying to reconstruct how long he'd lingered under the spray, that first night the snake had fucked him, until the icy water had brought him back to himself and gotten him going again. It still worries him that he doesn't know how long it had been.) Tonight he just showers off the sweat and the filth of the day, towels himself dry, pulls on the change of clothes.

The snake's still on his couch when he gets out of the shower. Hasn't moved its fucking feet, either. He walks past it, bonny and blithe and good and gay, straight into the galley kitchen. Pulls a knife out of the butcher block. Hefts it, assessingly. Leans over the pass-through into the living room, eyeballs the distance, gauges the necessary spin, pulls his arm back, and lets fly.

Snake catches *that*, too, but at least he tried. And it takes its fucking feet off the fucking table.

"Has honor been satisfied now?" it says, putting the book down and looking up. It turns the knife over and over in its fingers, sleek and dexterous. "Or shall I be on guard for projectile weapons for the remainder of the evening?"

"Depends," he says. He turns around (presenting his back to the snake, the snake *holding a fucking knife* in its hands, and that makes every single inch of his back *crawl* with remembered indignities that were never allowed to leave scars even before his skin was re-made, and he doesn't fucking let himself flinch). Opens the refrigerator. Takes out a beer. The only plus to living here: the concierge service doesn't give a fucking shit how old his ID says he is when they stock the kitchen. He won't let himself drink more than one even when there isn't a snake around, and even that so slowly that it's warm and flat by the time he's halfway through, but it's something.

"Oh?" The snake sounds amused. "On what?"

He nocks the mouth of the beer bottle on the edge of the counter, slams his fist down on it to pop off the cap, instead of trying to find where the fuck he left the bottle opener this time. Hey, they're not *his* countertops. "On whether or not you have your fucking feet back up on the table when I turn around again."

The snake laughs, soft and pleased. "No. I have been suitably chastised. Have you thought about what you'd like to do tonight?"

It makes his hackles rise. It's Delta, and that means he is going to have to fucking *pay attention* when all he really wants is to kick the fucking snake out of his fucking apartment and get some fucking *rest*. He can't remember the last time he slept the night straight through, but he's nearing his hard limit on just how long he can stay on high sentry without *one* night of passing out cold for

twelve hours straight, and he'd really fucking prefer not to do it with company.

Oh, God, he can't fucking remember the last time he fucking *slept*.

But no. Test or ally, he doesn't know which, and he's going to have to watch what he says and does all fucking night to make sure that it could be interpreted in a positive light no matter *what* the objective facts of the situation are, underneath all those layers of posture and pretense, and he is *so not in the fucking mood*.

"Girls' night in," he says. "We'll pop popcorn. I'll paint your toenails. You can put my hair in curlers."

Behind him, he hears the snake laugh. Making the snake laugh hasn't been an entertaining game for a long fucking time. He turns around. Starts rummaging in the fridge, cataloguing which leftovers are still edible and which ones have turned into science experiments by now. He's on his guard -- is always on his guard when he's alone in a room with a fucking snake -- but he still jumps six feet straight up when a hand plucks the earpiece from his ear without any sense of *presence* in his space to give the motion away ahead of time.

Actually jumps, not just metaphorical-I-twitched-a-little jumping; he spins and swivels in mid-air, coming to rest with his weight balanced on the balls of his feet, his hands held up loosely and ready to attack if necessary. Hadn't heard it coming. Fucking snake's leaning one hip against the counter. Smirking at him. Fucker. Knew he'd jump. Should kill it in its sleep.

If he *could*. If it fucking *slept*. Which it doesn't. Kind of like him. He settles for a glare. Tries to make it convincing. Harder than he wants to admit; the adrenaline that spiked through his system is starting to recede, and it leaves him faded, exhausted, in its wake.

Fuck, he really needs a fucking night off. This weekend, he tells himself. Virta offered. He'll try to get Virta to bring him home. Best nights' sleep he's gotten so far have been in that hotel in Manhattan with Virta hogging all the fucking covers. Just gotta get through this first.

"You're not being watched in your apartment anymore," the snake says, tossing the earpiece onto the counter. "Not while one of us is here. But it's still safer if you leave that out for the duration of this conversation."

"Hadn't realized I was being watched at all," he says. Mind going a million RPM, stuck in the mud and spinning wheels. He'd known the earpiece was one of the mechanisms by which the snake was watching him. He's just not sure what it means that *this* snake wants him to take it out.

The snake sighs. "Jonathan. JD. Let's not be coy with each other. The time for that has long since passed. Your cover is excellent and your play-acting is impeccable; I've been quite impressed. But I find it very hard to believe that you so wholeheartedly wish to support the plan, and I find it even harder to believe that you haven't pieced together what the plan *is*. I am, thankfully, alone in this belief."

This close, the snake can probably hear his heart racing. No way around it. He'll have to hope (if this is a test) that the snake will chalk it up to anger. "Gimme a fucking *break*," he snarls. "I've been at your beck and fucking call for three months now. You think I'm not trustworthy, you tell me, and I'll fuck right off and leave you to do whatever you've got in mind without my help. Don't try pulling this lying-to-me-to-get-me-to-confess shit, because there's nothing to confess. And I'm more than a little insulted that you might think there is."

It closes its eyes. Briefly. In a human, he'd call that expression 'praying for strength'. "This isn't a test," it says. When it opens its eyes, it's optical illusion time again: snake-man-snake-man. No. Snake. *Remember it's a snake*. "I'm handing you more leverage over me than you could possibly hand me leverage over you. You are necessary. Unique. I, on the other hand, am simply another copy. Easily unmakeable. Easily disposable." It smiles. It's not an amused expression. "Perhaps you would even be permitted to kill me. As a reward for good behavior. I imagine you've been wanting to for quite some time."

All of his buttons. Lined up in one neat row. Push, push, push. (Snake-man-snake. Man. Snake.) Too much to hope for. Not enough to believe.

He lets the anger crack over him, crest and crash. No matter what the truth is, he's still fucking pissed. And he's had moments of rage in his life before, and he's had moments where the rage overtook him and possessed him, and he's had moments where his vision has gone grey at the center and white around the edges. But he's never done anything as stupid as what he does now, which is haul off and pop the snake straight in the teeth.

Whole lot of push behind the punch. He's been working out. The past few weeks he's been lifting more and more, savaging the punching bag until his knuckles would be cracked and bleeding if he weren't wearing gloves; it's been his only outlet. Pays off now. He actually knocks the snake off balance.

*Didn't fucking see that coming, did you?*

It stumbles backwards and loses that preternatural grace for one split second. Winds up on its ass, staring up at him. As he watches, he can see a tiny drop of blood welling from the corner of its lip, quickly licked away.

The pad of his palm, where he drove it into the snake's mouth, throbs. (You hit the soft parts with your hand; you hit the hard parts with a tool. His father's advice, long ago, when he'd still been in a place to listen.) He doesn't shake it. Doesn't want to look one bit less strong than he is. Strong enough to punch a snake in the face and get away with it. Confident enough to believe he could.

The cold sick feeling in the pit of his stomach that he always has around this particular snake is back.

The snake's sitting sprawled on the floor, arms propping itself up, watching him. (Snake. Man.) All traces of amusement gone, but no anger replacing it. Just contemplation. "Yes," it says, quietly. Almost to itself. "I suppose you would feel that it's owed you. If I'm not mistaken, you've kept track of each time we killed you and brought you back, and you won't call the debt even until you've made up the numbers."

It lifts the back of its hand to the corner of its mouth, looks down to make sure the bleeding has stopped. Has. Snake healing powers. Good for something, at least. Then it looks back up at him. "That's what I'm offering you a chance to do, you know."

"I'm not sure why you think I'd be more pissed off at one pissant Goa'uld than at the people who've fucked me over ever day since this charming little body was born," he snarls. Last-ditch attempt. He's pretty much fucked. If the snake is on to him, there's not much he can do. He might be standing over the snake, but the snake's between him and the door, and it moves faster than he can. It's proven that, morning after morning. Run after run.

The snake cocks its head. "Because while you understand revenge, you also understand duty. And the chance to combine duty

with revenge would be irresistible."

It holds up a hand. Invitation: help-me-up. He stares at it. There's a little voice in the back of his head, whispering: *it already could have killed you. At any point. At any moment.*

He ignores it. Ignores the snake, too.

"Can you imagine, I wonder?" the snake says, softly. Quietly. "What it's like to realize that one's old habits are unsustainable. What it's like to find intellectual stimulation, after far too long. What it's like to know that you are one of many, and know that a part of you made the decision to create the whole of you, and feel that you are somehow ... wrong. Fractured. Lessened, and yet made more somehow. Left with some piece the others simply -- don't have. Don't want. The recognition that there is some other way. I believe you can imagine. I'm staking quite a bit on that belief, in fact. I don't believe I'm wrong."

He can't breathe. Like he was the one that got punched. Like he's the one laid out on the fucking floor.

The snake's voice is barely a whisper. It's still reaching up to him. "Human emotion. Human reactions. We exist on a continuum of understanding them, you know. There are two of us who have the best -- I'd say the only -- chance of seeing behind your masks. One of us has. The other hasn't. One of us wants to help you. The other one doesn't. Which means you should either trust me, or kill me first. I'm giving you the chance to do either."

He stares at it.

*Fuck.*

Waited too long. Let his cover slip too far. If he were what he says he is, he wouldn't have let the snake keep talking, would have protested or attacked or done ... *something*. He can't think of what. He's not sure if it means that he's still in shock or if his subconscious has decided to trust the snake or if he's lost his grasp on who he's supposed to be or if he just needs to crawl off into a hole somewhere and sleep for fifteen hours straight before he can *think* again.

Snake's still fucking staring back at him. Fuck. *Fuck.*

He reaches down. Snake clasps his wrist, not his hand. He puts a little heave into it. Snake doesn't need any help; fucker could have gotten up at any point. It's a *metaphor*, blah blah. It climbs to its feet, tugs at its jeans, rocks its jaw on the hinges, rocks its neck back and forth (crack-crack-pop). Like anyone would, after a fall like that.

Then it reaches up and backhands him. Half strength, so it only sends him reeling into the wall, not flying *through* it. He's got just enough time to think *fuck* for what feels like the eight billionth time -- a test after all, and he failed it. Until he hears the snake say, "And don't fucking punch me in the fucking face again."

"Don't fucking tempt me to," he snarls, face against the floor. Pushes himself up. His whole body aches.

When he looks up, the snake is holding a hand out again. Down to him, this time. The roles, reversed. "Come on," it says. "We have a lot to discuss, and not much time."

Yeah. That's what he's fucking afraid of.

\*

There are very few things that feel like jumping out of a plane except jumping out of a plane. This is one of them.

Snake's back on the couch, which means he can't sit there too. He's not going to get that close. Even the armchair isn't far enough away. He stands in the middle of the living room for a second (too slow, too stupid), then sinks down to the floor, about as far from the snake as he can get and still be in the same room. Folds his legs up into *kekka fuza*, but no: lotus position means he wouldn't be able to move fast enough if he has to. He settles for *seiza* instead; he's experienced enough that his feet and knees won't go numb too quickly if he winds up kneeling for long.

He can feel the familiar posture relaxing him. (Arches of his feet flat against the floor. Weight balanced on his heels. Spine straight, head up; knees slightly parted, palms resting on the tops of his thighs with fingers held loosely together. You can move quickly from *seiza* when you need to, no matter how submissive it looks to the untrained eye.)

The snake watches him. He gets the impression it's amused.

"Talk," he says. The position reminds him to be mindful of his breathing. (Out of practice, he realizes, suddenly. Fuck. How long has it been since he's made time for *shikantaza*? The fact he can't remember worries him.)

The snake puts its feet back up on the table. He doesn't bother to protest. "I'll start with what I believe to be the truth. I won't ask you to confirm or deny; I'm well aware you don't yet trust me yet."

"Ever," he says.

And yeah. The snake can pretend all it wants that it's the one giving up all the information here, but he knows better. He's far enough away that the snake *probably* can't sense his heartbeat, and if he pays enough attention to his breathing he can probably avoid giving anything away through changes in respiration, but no matter *how* good his poker face is, he still won't be able to keep from offering up a thousand autonomic cues the snake will take as confirmation. Fuck. Can't be helped. Keep going.

The snake rests its hands on the couch cushions, wide and open. *Nothing to hide here*. "Yet," it repeats. (He wants to wipe that perfect assurance off its face.) "I believe you are here as an agent of the SGC -- or, at the very least, as a personal agent of General O'Neill. I believe you are here to obtain information on the reason behind the Goa'uld presence on Earth, and I believe you are here to find ways to seek out and destroy that presence, to the best of your ability. I believe you are attempting to convince my brothers that you are so eager to help them in an attempt to gather as much information as you can about the extent of that presence, in preparation for its destruction, and the reason you haven't yet employed whatever methods you have no doubt been planning for the past three months to kill us all is because you aren't sure if you have all pieces of the puzzle."

It's watching him. He schools his face, holds himself still and steady. *Breathe*. "Interesting fairy tale you've got there, Skippy."

Anger flashes across the snake's face: one split second, gone, like lightning arcing from cloud to cloud right in front of your cockpit. "Shut up," it says. "We don't have *time* for your attitude. You've already come within inches of fucking yourself irreparably."

Oddly, it's the snake's use of profanity that has him shutting his mouth on the protest he's halfway on the way to making. (*Breathe*. He can have emotions later. Not yet.)

The snake continues. (Cranky and irritable and *fucking hell*, it sounds like Daniel's frustrated sniping whenever he takes his affable-idiot act one step too far.) "And I wouldn't care, except if *you* disappear, your people will throw everything they have at us until we're all nothing more than a very small stain on the sidewalk, and I have *no* intention of allowing that to happen to me. I argued against the actions they took against the agent you sent last year for that very reason. I knew it would bring *you*, or someone like you, creeping back in. The one thing no other System Lord ever realized about the Tau'ri is that you might not hold as much power, you might not hold as much territory, but there's one thing you do hold that makes your victory inevitable in the long term: *tenacity*."

As he watches (*breathes*), the snake gets up, paces back and forth. Just a few steps. Keeps the coffeetable between him and it. Doesn't get between him and the door. Almost like it's trying to *fucking have manners*. "What's your saying?" it snaps. "'We don't leave people behind?' The rest of my brothers don't realize that they aren't working against a planet, or even an organization; they're working against *people*. The minute they ordered your agent killed, it was over. They should have been watching for treachery ever since. You confused them. Feel lucky for that. Your story was ridiculous enough to be believable, and you've done a miraculous job upholding it since you arrived. But with your first fuckup, they *will* have you killed, and that *will* bring your people in full force, and they *will not rest until they destroy us all*."

It looks down at him, and its face isn't cold or distant or haughty at all. It's defiant. *Scared*. "I'm not going to let your mistakes kill me," it says. "So I propose a bargain. A trade. My full and complete cooperation, with all your works and plans, in exchange for my life and my freedom."

He opens his mouth. Doesn't know what he's about to say, but it doesn't much matter; the snake holds up a hand, and he closes his mouth again. "Don't answer yet," it says. "I wouldn't believe any answer given so quickly. I hadn't intended to bring you this bargain until I thought you were readying to make your move. But there's one other piece of information you need to know, and I don't think you've figured it out yet. I give you this as a gift. A proof of my intentions. You're being watched. You've been watched since the beginning. You've realized this, or you're not as smart as I know you are. If you're smart, you've also realized that my brothers and I are not the only Goa'uld present on your planet, or even in this company. I'm certain you've spotted some of them. I'm also certain you haven't spotted others. You've likely been counting on internal warfare to keep the Goa'uld you've identified from sharing information with my others. Under any other circumstances, you might be right. But this --" The snake's hand flicks up and down, indicating the skin it's wearing, the skin it's stolen. "This is not the only appearance we -- they -- wear. Host body and Goa'uld can be cloned separately."

There's a desert in his mouth, and it's going to choke him. His skin is crawling. Spiders. It can't --

It drops back down onto the couch, looking weary. Spent. Rubs a hand over its face. "In fact, the first clone madewas the Goa'uld alone. A ... willingly complicit host was found. A young man. Tau'ri. One quite lacking in anything so troublesome as a conscience. In exchange for eternal life, the host provided the information about the Tau'ri that would prove to be so useful. An experiment in partnership, an experiment in applying lessons learned from the Tok'ra. It has proven to be a surprisingly effective tactic; no Tau'ri who is not host or former host has been able to identify the pair as Goa'uld." The snake's eyes are dark on his face. "You haven't."

His hands are shaking. Too much to hope it's not visible against the dark denim of his jeans. "You're lying," he says. Voice doesn't shake, even though the hands are.

The snake shakes its head. "No," it says. It almost sounds regretful. "I told you in the kitchen: there are two of us who have the best chance of seeing behind your masks. No others. And you've come dangerously close to handing him the keys to your little masquerade, and you haven't even realized, because you think he's your friend."

It stands again. "I give you this. A gift. A token of my good faith. Several of us believe you can be trusted; several of us believe that you can't. There's one last test being planned. Your Virta will come to you, bearing proof the man you killed was seeking to defect to the SGC and bring all the information he'd collected along with him. That's why you were sent to kill him. Virta will claim to have read all the files. To want to find a way to get that information into the hands of the angels. He'll claim to have finally found the point at which his conscience outweighs his greed; he'll claim that helping hand his planet over into the hands of an alien conqueror is too much, even for him. He'll ask your help, but he'll say he'll break the story on his own if you don't assist him. And then he'll step back to see what you do. Whether you help him, or come to us to betray him. What he won't say is that your life will depend on giving the correct answer. And if I hadn't warned you, you might not have."

It flicks its eyes across him: up, down. No hint of what it thinks it sees shows in its face. Pity. It would be useful to catch the reflection, because he has no *fucking idea* what his face might be showing; the sick cold twisting feeling in his stomach has overtaken everything else and he knows he's lost any semblance of control he might have had.

"Make it the right answer," the snake says, quietly. "And consider my offer. I'll be in touch."

It lets itself out.

\*

-- *blank*.

Halfway down the hallway. Into the bathroom and --

-- *blank*.

On his knees. *Seiza* again. Less perfect this time. Too busy. Dry heaves; glad he didn't eat too --

-- *blank*.

Water running. The shower. He's in it. Huddled in the corner. Fully clothed. Soaking wet. The water's brisk and bracing. Ran down the hot-water tank again.

He unfolds himself. Slowly; he aches everywhere he moves. He watches his own hand as it reaches out and shuts off the tap. His mouth tastes like toothpaste. Remembered to brush his teeth; didn't remember to strip himself naked. In the silence caused by the lack of running water, he pulls the t-shirt over his head. It lands on the tile with a sick *wetthud*, the sound of a silenced bullet entering human flesh. Follows it with his jeans. Wet, they're a bitch to peel off.

No. Can't leave them there. He forces himself to stoop from the knees and pick the clothes up, wring them out, drape them over the shower door. *Drip*.

The inside of his head feels hollow, empty. Echoing.

Take stock. Inventory. Cold, wet: those are fixable. Prescription number one: a towel. He wraps himself up in it and takes himself back into the bedroom to find a pair of sweats. No shirt. He can't bear the thought of anything binding his wrists, his throat. Knees and elbows shaky. Low blood sugar. He's not eating enough. Hasn't been for a while. Prescription number two: food. He walks through the living room, into the kitchen, and methodically eats the last two slices of cold pizza from the refrigerator, door open, carefully not letting his eyes rest anywhere in the kitchen but on the pint of shrimp fried rice from last week that he's been meaning to throw out. Disorientation, haziness: shock. Understandable, really. He's been under a great deal of stress.

Prescription number three: a single ounce of Scotch, straight from the bottle in the cabinet he hasn't let himself open yet. It burns on the way down. He folds his hands around the edge of the counter, closes his eyes, and *wills* himself present, wills himself into his body, until he can trace the alcohol's path. It works. A little, at least. By the time the fire reaches his stomach, he's not feeling so much like he's sleepwalking anymore.

Eventually, he straightens.

Has to save this somehow. Has to save *himself* somehow. Back into the living room. He drags one of the cushions off the Ikea-monstrosity couch and drops it next to the wall. Arranges himself *kekka fuza*. Facing the wall. Folds his hands into their proper *mudra*. He usually doesn't bother, but times like this, when you've been failing to keep proper discipline for far too fucking long, you pull out all the stops and find refuge in what formality you can summon.

*Breathe.*

He centers his breath in his chest, extends his senses throughout his body. Examining each perception, one by one, in turn. *Here* the throbbing of his bruised cheekbone, relic of the snake cracking him into the wall. *Here* the ache of his shins, finally starting to protest against the abuses he's been heaping upon them for months now. *Here* the lingering flavor of the Scotch, rich and woody, ghosting around the base of his sinuses; *here* the taste at the back of his throat, acid and sour, that nothing can overwrite but time; *here* the muscles of his stomach moving, protesting the grease he's fed them.

He embraces the totality of them all, examines them for what they can tell him -- *you are a human; you are alive; you inhabit this body* -- and sets them aside. They aren't important now; he needs to go deeper.

Eventually he realizes the numbness he's feeling has given way to rage. (At himself. At Ba'al. At this whole fuckingsituation.) He examines it as well. It's been quietly building for a while; he hadn't noticed. Doesn't surprise him that he hadn't. The self he had been in days past would have rather died than spend this much time with his thoughts. He's spent the past three months trying to make himself back into that self.

He can see it now, though, and it isn't going to serve any purpose. He breathes it away. Slowly. Perceive, understand, embrace, bid farewell. Takes him a while. (Harder than it used to be.) Look for anything else that might lie behind it, anything else that might prevent him from getting to where he needs to be. Fucking hell, it's a mess in there. Psyches are like planes; skip the regular maintenance and the things won't get off the ground.

He's looking now, and Clancy's face swims up to greet him, eyes accusing, out of the iron vault of his faults and failures he's buried far away. O my brother, o my brother, who has not fulfilled thy days! *I will not kill* -- come, let us go out into the field -- he had to, he *had* to, no choice, necessity is a breach against the laws of the understanding and necessity is a *fucking bitch* but oh, his fall, his failure --

*Breathe.*

Let it go, let it go, put it *away*. (Not yet, not now, not over.) Job to fucking do. Go back to the beginning. He'd always amused his teachers by how concrete his metaphors are. But a mind is just a computer with neurons instead of circuits, and it might not be easy to learn the programming language, but it's *possible*. His works best when he imagines things as *real*; he doesn't see images (some of his fellow postulants described full-sensory immersive experiences), but he feels his constructs in his mind, heavy to the touch, possessing shape. Form. Reality. Weight.

So. A box, maybe. Packed tight with tangles. His answer is at the bottom. He makes himself feel his hands lifting up the first layer, setting it apart, spreading out the knots and whorls of interconnected fact for his examination.

*Breathe.*

What he thinks are not words; his perception is too deep for that. Concepts, perhaps. Ideas. Implications, understandings. Things that are true because they make up the fabric of the reality he is moving through at the moment. He stills his mind (*calm, calm*) and lets the understanding seep through him.

The imagined snarls beneath his imagined hands straighten out into equations, period-doubling bifurcations endlessly branching into chaos. Each node a potential point of trust, a potential error to be made. Only one path clear through to the goal. Either the snake (and he needs a better name for it, but Delta will do) is telling him the truth, or it is lying to him. Truthfulness in one element does not predict truthfulness in all elements. Its story is composed of a dozen points where two sets of incompatible motivations might result in the same set of final action, and he can't tease out the reality hidden below. Free fall either means free from falling or falling freely, and there's no way of knowing which is which.

If Delta is telling him the truth, Virta is Ba'al. Has been, the entire time. Now that he's brought himself this far under, he can consider the matter, without the overwhelming instinctive roil of revulsion. *What if*. What if Caciorelli isn't the snake on the team after all. What if it's been Virta all along, keeping an eye on him, the one snake to try friendship and ingratiation instead of coercion and control. What if Ba'al, the *original* Ba'al, had managed to do what Delta said: somehow see fit to *share* instead of conquer, cede some ground to make up some other.

(Could be Virta's a snake and Delta's just lying about the cooperation. *Nothing of the host survives*, and they've proven it for a lie again and again, but they've never been able to get a definitive answer about how much the snake can draw on the host without the host's cooperation. Skills, yeah, Memories, yeah. Personality? What is personality, anyway? Ask Carter, ask Skaara, ask any of their few and scattered success stories, the ones that haven't met their maker or sailed on to the other shore, because the snake that fucked him over never left a calling card and he can't fucking *remember*. Won't find an answer there. No matter how important it is to know.)

If Virta *is* Ba'al, he needs to know how much of the Virta he'd considered a friend is Ba'al and how much is the host shining through, because Delta is Ba'al and Delta wants to be friends *too*. He'd trusted Virta. As much as he can trust anyone at the moment.

Either Delta wants to warn him against trusting the untrustworthy, or Delta wants to shatter what (little) support he's managed to find. If Virta is not Ba'al, he cannot trust Delta. If Virta is Ba'al, he may be able to trust Delta. It's not definite proof. But if Virta is Ba'al, it will also have proven that his ability to decide whom he can trust is *completely fucking broken*.

(Stop. *Breathe*. Anger has been set aside, even anger at self. No place for it here. He makes himself imagine the box he has built to hold all the pieces of this mission, concentrate until he can almost imagine the grain of the wood beneath his conjured mental hands. He has put the rage elsewhere for the moment. He'll deal with it later. When he has to. Until then, he will hold the box, and fill it only with what he can afford to allow himself to perceive.)

(A mind is just a computer, with neurons instead of circuits. It will listen to you once you learn to program it. It is possible to instruct it to ignore any data that does not pertain to the problem at hand. Don't think about what happens when the program crashes.)

If Virta is Ba'al, then Virta's overtures to him might be the test. *If*. If Virta's going to be the test, then Delta's offer to him might not be. *If*.

There's nothing saying they might not both be. Test and trap, all rolled into one, another twist in the noose he can feel tightening around his neck.

Eventually, he becomes aware his alarm is singing from the bedroom. (Backup only. He's never *needed* an alarm clock in his life; the clock in his head wakes him when he tells it to. But he's always set it, just in case.) Means it's 0600. He unknots himself from *kekka fuza* and stands; his ankle rolls, and he catches himself against the wall. He's been sitting for a long damn time.

He goes to turn off the alarm. Doesn't need another shower, but he can't skip his morning run. Changes in behavior look suspicious. Can't afford to look suspicious. Can take it easy today, though; a couple of miles' jog should suffice. (It'll leave him time to catch up on his reading, too. He has a conference call scheduled at 0930 and he didn't prep a fucking thing he was supposed to.) He's careful to stretch out before he goes. Can't afford an injury, either.

The run's a nightmare. He feels like he's slogging through mud; his time in meditation has left him with a growing awareness of his body breaking down beneath him, punished by lack of sleep and the lengths to which he's been driving himself. Slows him down. Eventually, he becomes aware the anger is returning. He lets it stay this time. Maybe it'll keep him going for a while. He can't hold the clarity of no-mind all the time; the anger will at least lend him acuity, if he can avoid letting it rule him completely.

*If*.

Eventually, he becomes aware that he might have the first fragments of a plan.

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#### iv. april

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*little angels lie above my head and read me like an open book  
suck my blood, break my nerve, offer me their arms  
well, i will not be an enemy of anything at all  
-- Counting Crows*

understandably distressed at the scope & magnitude of my error. however, as i was unsure as to whether or not the intel i had been provided was accurate, i also resisted the urge to immediately alter my plans in response, before obtaining a chance to ascertain the accuracy of said information.

while i remain unwilling to reveal the name of my informant in written form, i will provide that information, verbally and in person, upon request. this information is sensitive beyond the confines of ts/sap scif channels, and i have chosen to voluntarily withhold this information under the provisions of executive order 16891, section 1.3(c) (revised). my intention in withholding this information is not to falsify data or provide an incomplete debriefing, but to protect the department of homeworld security. my control officer in said department is also able to provide this information on request.

while possible to apply the fraiser test to determine whether the individual known as jan virta was, in fact, a goa'uld host, no test could reveal whether the host was willfully complicit -- nor, indeed, host to a clone of the goa'uld ba'al in specific -- particularly when revealing the information that i had reason to believe this to be the case, in advance of the test that the ba'al clones had allegedly devised, would have been detrimental to both myself and my informant. i was, however, able to apply said test, at considerable personal cost, to obtain the

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"Wait a second," he pants, breathlessly, rolling over onto his back and dragging the spare pillow underneath his hips. "Like this. It's good, I'm flexible --"

"Fucking hell, you sure are," Virta says, kneeling between his legs and grinning down at him. "Gimme a second, hang on --"

They haven't done this yet. Been a handjob here, a blowjob there. All so very low-key and laid-back. It isn't that he thinks some acts are a betrayal more than other acts are, or even that some acts are only betrayals if they're done with intent instead of as part of the endless game of chess he's playing. Question just hasn't come up. Took him a while to maneuver things tonight so that it would.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, in certain circumstances it's perfectly possible to prove a negative. Goa'uld possession is one of them. With the support of complex and elaborate machinery, it's possible to prove that an individual is *not* a Goa'uld host, just as it's possible to prove that they *are*. He doesn't have the complex and elaborate machinery. Field tests are less reliable. There are six low-tech tests designed for deployment under conditions where MRI imaging is impossible. Five of them are only suitable for detecting a new possession: seventy-two hours or less. Four of them require the complicit cooperation of the suspected host, or at the very least, make it clear to the individual that the test is being conducted.

The one test that will detect an older possession has a twenty percent false negative rate: in one case out of every five, it will fail to detect a symbiote that is actually present. (Fraiser had written papers. Physiology of the host. Physiology of the Goa'uld. Lots of complicated factors.) Fortunately for him, it's also one of the two tests that can be conducted without suspicion. If you're willing to come up with alternate explanations for your actions. Fortunately for him, he is.

Virta slides into him, slow burn that under any other circumstances would feel fucking fantastic. He wraps his legs around Virta's waist and locks his ankles together. There's a part of him, cool and calculating, locked behind the whimpers and moans and writhing spine-shivering wiggles, that's watching the choreography. Making sure he puts on a good show. It's like he's sitting on the side of the bed, watching himself, watching Virta, distant and detached. The sounds of sex -- the wet, fevered slap of skin against skin -- have never sounded less erotic.

He's lucky he's had practice faking it with the snake over the past three months; otherwise, he'd blow the whole thing sky-high. (Harder for a man to pretend interest where there is none. Still, there are plenty of men who don't get hard when they're getting fucked; it helps.) He can't do what he usually does -- retreat inside his head, let his body go through the motions without him -- this time; he has a job to do. Test to administer.

It only takes a little bit of encouragement for Virta to bend over him, enough for him to wrap his arms around Virta's neck. Enough for him to clutch at Virta's back, digging his nails into the skin of Virta's shoulders. Enough for him to ape passion, to pretend that he is so far gone with the experience of pleasure that he is barely conscious of what he's doing.

They'd practiced. All of them. It's a skill you don't lose with time, once you've developed it. The window is millimeters wide; the amount of force necessary is more than most people are willing to use. He's at a shit angle for it. Can't be helped. He drags his fingers up Virta's spine, hard enough to bruise. Virta's skin is slippery with sweat. Makes it even harder.

A Goa'uld symbiote can't be detected externally in a human host by visual examination alone. Not once it's had time to settle in its permanent resting position, carving out room for itself behind bone and muscle and tendon. Nor will a simple touch reveal its presence. But in eighty percent of human hosts, upwardly-directed sharp pressure, applied between the T3 and T4 vertebrae, will cause an answering involuntary spasm in the symbiote, fractional and minute. Detectable. If you're paying attention. If you know what you should feel, underneath your questing fingertips, the faintest of flutters so easy to miss.

He pays attention.

*Fuck.*

At least Virta's not one of the twenty percent. Small fucking mercies.

\*

Easier than he'd been expecting to keep from giving away that he knows the truth. Either he's getting better at lying (with face, with body, with voice) or his subconscious had already known the truth and prepared him to receive confirmation without flinching. Either way, doesn't matter. He's pretty sure Virta doesn't catch on that he's realized.

Virta's tiny little studio apartment is up by Lake Union, a grey and unprepossessing building that nonetheless has some fucking gorgeous views. When he leaves, he doesn't hail a cab; he laces up his sneakers a little tighter and takes off at his typical brutal pace. It's two in the morning, but Seattle's safe enough by night if you don't make yourself look like an easy mark. Nobody bothers him; he's had enough practice in looking dangerous.

He shouldn't stay out too late, shouldn't take too much of a detour, but Justifiable Cover Maintenance Secures Us Provisions; he has enough leeway that he doesn't have to take the most direct route home. Which is good, because he has a lot of thinking to do, and it's the kind of thinking that can't be done anywhere but at top speed or in full meditation; anything else would overwhelm him.

Fact: He has fucked up. Badly. He has trusted someone he shouldn't have trusted, failed to spot warning signs he should have caught. (Looking back on it, there were several. Dozens. A full accounting of all his fuckups will have to wait, though; he doesn't have *time* for them now.) The fact that he is still standing, still independent, not yet snaked: good news (for him), but unexpected. The magnitude of his fuckups is so overwhelming that his good fortune is just that: luck. He can't rely on luck forever.

Fact: He would not have seen the truth lying behind the false faces he failed to notice without assistance. Fact: That assistance came from one of the snakes. Fact: The motives and motivations verbalized by that snake for its betrayal of its compatriots are reasonable and plausible within the framework of what he knows of the Goa'uld. Fact: The snake has said it is willing to help him sell the others down the river in exchange for a guarantee of its own safety.

Fact: If he accepts that offer, he will be committing himself to an alliance with a fucking snake.

Fact: If he accepts that offer, he will be condoning, by implication, whatever that fucking snake has come here to do.

Fact: It would be possible for him to accomplish his stated mission objectives -- the eradication of the snake presence on Earth --

without assistance from the inside, if no one on the inside knew what he was trying to do. Fact: The snake, or at least one of it, knows what he is trying to do; there's no way he concealed his reactions well enough to maintain the presumption of innocence. Fact: The snake will now be observing his actions in the light of its assumed knowledge of his mission objectives. Inference: The snake will be able to deduce what his intermediary plans leading to that mission objective are. Inference: If the snake wants to stop him, it will be able to.

Fact: The snake has not yet stopped him.

Conjecture: The snake has told him the absolute truth, whole and entire, about its motivations; it objects to whatever the grand plan of the others is, or it thinks that grand plan doesn't have a chance of success, and it's looking for a guarantee of safety. Conjecture: The snake is setting up a long, subtle test or trap, one that will culminate in either his death or (more likely) a suborning so thorough it will advance the grand plan while (somehow) delivering a fatal setback to the snake's enemies. Conjecture: The snake is ... no, he really can't see any other options but those two. No matter how hard he tries to come up with other possibilities, he keeps circling back to those. Either the snake is telling him the absolute truth, or it's trying to pull his strings for its own purposes.

Fact: These two possibilities are mutually exclusive, and the time is approaching -- he can feel it -- when he will have to commit to one set of actions or another; he can't keep playing both sides against the middle forever.

Fact: He has to make a choice. Before the point of no return, before the moment when he will be forced (by pressures both external and internal) to leap one way or the other, because decisions made on the spur of the moment are more likely to be the wrong decisions. He's already made too many wrong decisions. He can't afford any others.

Game theory again. Draw the matrix in your head. Draw the branches of the tree. Draw the truth tables. If the snake's offer of alliance is a lie and a test, and he rejects it, he wins and the snake loses. If the snake's offer of alliance is a lie and a test, and he accepts it, he loses and the snake wins. If the snake's offer of alliance is genuine, and he rejects it, both of them lose, but he loses more. If the snake's offer is genuine, and he accepts it, they both win, but the cost of his victory will be high indeed.

If fucking  $p$ , then fucking  $q$ . If fucking not- $p$ , then fucking not- $q$ .

It all boils down to one question, over and over again: can he trust the fucking snake, or not? Question he can't fucking answer. Not now. He's proven to himself that his perception is seriously fucking fucked.

O'Neill would never trust a snake. Ever. No matter what the extenuating circumstances might be. Particularly this snake. And he keeps having to remind himself that he's not O'Neill -- not, *not*, no matter that he's drawing on O'Neill's experience and O'Neill's abilities, dredging up the secrets he's let slumber for so long -- but he can't let himself fall into the reactionary trap of doing the opposite of what O'Neill would do *now* any more than he could have back when he'd first become *himself*. If  $p$ , then not- $q$  leaves  $p$  and  $q$  just as bound as any other logical proposition -- first and greatest of the realizations that led him to his entire fucking self-identity -- and he spent too goddamn long building that separation to allow himself to fall into that trap. Don't react; *act*. He has learned, over and over again, that he can't define himself by negatives; a life spent running *from* means you're that much more likely to trip and fall into a pit you didn't notice because your head was turned to watch what was behind you.

He needs a judgement call. A reality check. Someone who can reassure him that his logic is sound, that his judgement isn't as fucked as he's starting to suspect he's managed to let it get. And he needs it from someone who isn't O'Neill, because there's no way in fucking hell O'Neill could be any more objective about the situation than he is.

The candidate should be obvious. There are two and only two people in this world that he trusts, wholly and without reservation. O'Neill is one of them. And for the last twelve weeks, he's been closing off his mind to thoughts of the other (the mind is a computer, and like any computer, it can be given a set of instructions), because if he hadn't, he would have gone mad from pain or longing.

He can't, in good conscience, ask Mitchell to come under with him. (And oh, *God*, he wishes he could.) Mitchell would hold; he's good and he's smart and he's fucking steady as hell. But Mitchell's also crippled, and *crippled* isn't a dirty word -- honorable scars won in honorable service, ferryman's fee paid in full and in advance -- but it's a fact of their life, the life they're building together: there are things Mitchell can't do anymore. This is one of them.

He wishes to God that it wasn't.

If he could risk a line out, anything deeper than the shallow channels that are already more of a risk than he should accept (but he has no choice, and so much of this has been about having no choice, and it should be getting easier the more he learns to deal with it but it *isn't* and he thinks it never will) he'd call up Mitchell and dump this in his lap. Because there are two people in this world he trusts, but only one of them can be trusted with *this* situation.

Can't, though. Can't be helped. Suck it up. Keep on going. (One foot in front of the other. Don't think about it too closely, or else you'll have to start thinking about all the *other* reasons you're not calling Mitchell, all the ones that revolve around how the minute you hear his voice all the programming will start to crumble and there'll be no fucking way to get it back.)

Mitchell's not the only option, though. And it's a long shot, but it's one he's kept in reserve, in the back of his mind, from moment one.

He'll send the message tomorrow. If he's really lucky, the snake won't push him to make a commitment, one way or the other, until after he knows it's been received.

\*

All's quiet for another three days. Breathing room. Good thing on the surface, not so great when you get down past the first layer. He's nervous and jumpy, only avoiding looking over his shoulder because looking over his shoulder would be suspicious. Can't change your behavior. Can't act any differently than you did. This is all a delicate dance of appearances and reality, and he's been playing a role for three and a half months but the parameters of the role keep slipping and he's got no fucking *clue* what he should be doing if he were actually who and what he says he is. So he settles for just keeping his head down, working on the things he's been working on: interminable conference calls and cutthroat negotiations and the constant knowledge that everything he's doing is advancing the snake's plan, one infinitesimal step after another.

It would be a fucking ironic bitch, he thinks, if his actions turn out to be the factor that lets the snake win in the end. But he can't give his duties anything less than his full capability. To do otherwise would not only be suspicious -- because the snake knows full well what he's capable of -- but dangerous. If the snake -- any of them -- believes he is doing less than his best, he stops being an asset and starts being a liability. And he knows what happens to liabilities in the snake's world.

His only consolation is that Delta leaves him the fuck alone.

It's a relief, in a way, when Virta comes wandering into his office on Thursday, just before lunch. Uncharacteristically subdued, looking like his dog just fucking got run over by a fucking car or something, and *flip-flop* goes his stomach, because it's confirmation. Delta hadn't been lying to him.

Game fucking on.

"Hey," Virta says. Looks over his shoulder. Checking for the boss. Looking for a moment where it's just the two of them: carrying on an affair right under the boss's nose, and if Virta had been who he'd represented himself as, it would have been the last fucking thing he would have done, because he'd spent so long trying to position himself as saving grace.

Should have fucking seen it. Should have fucking *spotted* it. Virta had been playing worried-for-him, concern that he was in some kind of abusive fucking relationship or something -- *ha, ha* -- up until the point they'd gone to fucking New York and he'd fucking let Virta fucking play him, thinking all the while that *he* was the one using *Virta*. At which point Virta had let it drop, slid sideways so carefully into the offer of fuckbuddy-and-safe-harbor that he'd barely fucking *noticed*, and if Virta had really been what he had -- *it* had -- said it was, things would have been so different. A friend who's worried about your safety, a friend who believes you're being exploited and possibly endangered, wouldn't invite you to his bed, not when there's a chance those actions might cause your overly-controlling boyfriend to find out and *freak* out. Should have fucking realized. Something should have read wrong. He hadn't caught the wrongness. Not even a fucking *hint*.

Stop. No point in kicking yourself over your mistakes. They happened. It's over. Move on.

"Hey," he says back, locking his workstation (quick flick of fingers over the keys; it's second nature by now) and spinning around in his desk chair. "What's up?"

"Heading out for lunch," Virta says. (And fucking shit death, but the reactions are *note*-perfect, down to the listless little hand-gesture, and if it hadn't been for Delta's warning he probably would have fallen for it, and that makes his fuckingskin *crawl*.) "Market, maybe. I could use ... You wanna come with? Please."

It's hard, so *fucking* hard, to try to figure out how he would have reacted if he didn't know this whole fucking thing was a setup. Both of them playing roles. Virta has more practice than he does, is all. He's still rusty, even now.

So: they've established themselves as friend, as comrades. Virta's been positioning itself as his second-in-command, his outlet, his wingman and his lieutenant. If his 2IC came to him, looking like Virta does now, he'd move to help: get out of the environment, get away from the problem, and figure out what kind of pep talk or problem-solving was warranted. He's done it a thousand times.

He tries for 'casual' and 'concerned' all at once, and hopes he hits it. "Sure," he says. "Gotta be back by two, is all. Conference call with the suits again."

Virta manages a little smile, pale and wan. "Shouldn't be a problem," it says. "I just ... fresh air. You know."

They're quiet as they take the elevator down, which isn't unusual. He can't quite resist the urge to poke, though. (Broken tooth. Your tongue always finds it in your mouth, even once you're already down to tasting blood.) "You're quiet," he says, mild as mother's milk, as they spill out onto the grey and dank street. "Something up?"

"Yeah," Virta says. Looks over its shoulder, playing jumpy as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. "I just. I don't. I didn't think it was a good idea to say anything inside."

Things are waking up inside his head. Processors coming online. Fucking *finally*. "Yeah?" he asks, jamming his fists into the pocket of his hoodie, fingers closing around the few stray coins he's forgotten to dispose of elsewhere. "What's up?"

Virta bites its lip. Looks over its shoulder again. As *obvious* as a jumpy long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs, or as a kid who's stumbled into something he shouldn't have stumbled into, and it's a *perfect* fucking representation of an amateur trying to play with the big boys and overplaying his hand. It's such a well-constructed role that if it hadn't been for the warning, he knows *he would* have believed.

Fucking hell. What *else* has he missed?

"Look," it says. "I think I'm being watched. I think I found something. Big. Like, really, really big. Like, there-aren't-even-laws-to-cover-it big." Pause. "You remember, a couple of weeks ago, when I gave you that bundle of stuff we got off the military network the boss wanted us to crack?"

"Yeah," he says. "I remember."

They hit the red light at the corner, get caught in the knot of people waiting for the light to turn. Smart move would be to fucking stop talking; walk-and-talk to avoid surveillance only works when you *keep fucking walking*, and even then, not always. But the role Virta's playing wouldn't know that. Still makes his teeth fucking itch when Virta keeps talking anyway. "Okay," it says, jittering just a little, bouncing in place on the heels of its feet. "This is gonna take a bit. Bear with me. So you know all the weird tech shit on that system, right? All the plans and blueprints and stuff. I -- oh, God, this is gonna sound fucking insane. This is gonna sound fucking insane, and you're not going to believe me, but you're the only person I can think of who might possibly *not* think I've lost my fucking mind, so I'm gonna try."

"Go for it," he says. "I won't call you insane until you're done explaining."

Virta looks around itself again (obvious, *glaring*) and drags him away from the push of the crowd a little, drops its voice. "Okay," it says again. "The crazy part is, I think the conspiracy theorists are right. I think there *are* aliens at Area 51, and I think the government's been covering it up for years and *years*. It's buried *deep* in the shit we pulled, but if you read between the lines, it's there. There's no way some of that stuff was developed here. And I think -- I don't think the aliens are the good guys. I think we're fighting some kind of secret war, and we're really fucking close to *losing*."

There's something amusing, he thinks, in the way they're both pretending. Going through the motions of you-know-I-know and running down their lines. "Yeah, okay," he says. "Time to be glad that I promised you I wouldn't call you crazy until you were done."

Virta tries for another little smile, but it flickers, fades. Fucking *hell*, that fucking snake is good. Or maybe it's the host. He doesn't know. *Can't* know. "I know, I know. But -- it *fits*, okay? And it's the only thing that does. So okay, just go with me on the alien thing for a second. So, like, all the targets the boss has given us -- I think they're all somehow related, you know? Again, you really gotta put it together, bit by bit, like six pieces from six different places, but I think all the targets the boss has been giving us are somehow part of this coverup shit. Which means -- I think the boss knows. About the whole thing, I mean. I think he's somehow a part of it. And I'm not sure that he's on the side of the angels."

So many ways he could play this. So many paths he could try. He can feel them clicking across in his mind, back and forth, possibility after possibility. Assume he is a loyal agent of the snake. Assume one of his underlings has come to him and said something to make him think the jig is close to being up. What would he do?

Deflect. Discourage. "Okay," he says, making his voice as dismissive as possible. "Look, I know I said I wouldn't call you crazy, but -- dude. Crazy. When was the last time you slept?"

Virta grabs his shoulders. He suppresses the automatic (instinctive) impulse to knock those hands away; there's no reason for him to be on high alert, or rather, the persona he's fronting would work hard to avoid showing the persona Virta is showing that he's *capable* of high alert. (The layers make his *head fucking hurt*.) "Please," it says. Puts a bit of *push* in its voice, a perfectly-gauged note of urgency. "Look, I know you spend a lot of time with the boss, I know you've got your *thing*, and I haven't said anything else because it's none of my business and I know you can take care of yourself but I think -- I think you're in danger."

Nice. He'd been wondering how the snake would justify coming to *him* with this; after all, he's widely known as one of the boss's pets. Logically he should be the last person in the universe Virta should come clean to. He likes to think he would have thought of that. If this had been real. If he hadn't been warned.

Virta licks its lips again, not waiting for him to say anything. "I think we're all in a lot of trouble," it says. "I think the boss has been trying to get some kind of, I don't know, somebody on the inside or something. You know that company we went to New York to try to buy? Remember I found those files that said they were related to this military thing? I keep coming back to that, because -- the guy who keeled over while we were out there. I found some shit. A couple of saved emails. I think he was about to go to somebody, blow the whistle. Because this shit is *scary*. And I know the cops said it was natural causes, but I think -- I wonder if the boss had him killed. Somehow. And I really, really, *really* don't fucking want you or me to be next, because we were there and we've been working with this shit and if somebody's trying to clean up after themselves, we're the next logical target. And I'm thinking we need to, I don't know, tell somebody or something. Leave a message somewhere or something. Make sure that if anything happens to us, somebody will *know*."

Virta's fingers clutch against his shoulders. It's a lovely fucking impression of panic one step away from hysteria, fear-for-its-life written in every motion, every word. He runs the scenarios in his head again, judges that it's all right to pull away from Virta's touch. (Finally.) Keeps his notion of how he would have played this in his head.

He's got a sick, grinding sense in the pit of his stomach that if he'd gone into this cold, if Virta had come to him with this story and this level of terror, he might have caved. Might have told Virta there was nothing to worry about, that there were people taking care of things, that none of the information Virta was telling him was new to him at all. The relief of having dodged a bullet is no relief at all, not when you realize *just how fucking close* you nearly came.

Still. Have to play it carefully. Put yourself into the role you need to be playing: the snake's trusted agent, understanding there is a danger, identifying that there is a potential complication but not sure of the best way to handle it. He's *spretty* sure that person would move to neutralize the threat as quickly as possible, which -- if they weren't standing on a public street -- would involve silencing Virta, decisively and permanently. (Good thing they're standing on a public fucking street. Having to fight a fucking snake would *really* fucking make him cranky. He wonders if that's why Virta decided on *here* for the showdown.)

So, the next best option: shut Virta up, and go running straight to the snake as soon as he can get free. And if *he hadn't* decided to take Virta into his confidence -- and fucking *hell*, whether or not he would have is something he'll never know -- he would have done the same thing, would have *had* to do the same thing, and it would have fucking *killed him* to have to do it. Because if this had been real, if Virta had actually been nothing but a stupid innocent *amateur* poking his fingers in places those fingers shouldn't have wandered, there would have been no way Virta wouldn't have tripped a tripwire or a fucking dozen, and Ba'al would have found out. Would have known Virta had brought the issue to him, would have wondered why he hadn't done something. And he would have known all those factors, and he would have realized that Virta was lost but believed there was still a chance to save the rest of his team. And he would have done exactly what he's going to do now: go to the snake and spill his fucking guts.

One quick flash, of the agonies he would have agonized. Because in that scenario, he would have believed he'd be turning a stupid punk kid over to something whose idea of a good time is knives and acid and dropping you down a fucking two-hundred-foot hole over and over and *over again*, and he still would have done it. Needs of the goddamn fucking many. He would have hated it, hated it like he'd hate stomping puppies or poisoning babies, but he would have fucking *done it*, with the hum of the sarcophagus in his ears and the feel of his voice in his own throat, screaming. (No Daniel to be his conscience. Not anymore. Not ever again.)

Would have fucking left him in pieces. Again. If it had played out that way. Didn't. And it's all thanks to a fuckingsnake.

Keeping the layers and roles straight in his head makes him want to put a fist through a wall somewhere. Can't. So he channels what he can into his voice and shoves the rest of it back into the fucking box in his fucking head and he will fucking *deal with it later*. Like next year, maybe. "Okay," he says, trying to keep his voice low and compelling. Reassuring. "Okay, look. Just ... don't say anything to anybody else. You don't want to call attention to yourself. I'll look into things a little, make sure I don't trip any warnings. I'm closer to the inside. I can get more information, some corroborating evidence. If we're going to do anything with this, we need to make sure we've got as much intel as possible. You just keep doing what you're doing, and I'll take care of it."

Virta's face transforms. It's perfect. Hesitation giving way to relief and gratitude and a sudden slow relaxation, spreading across the playing field like a sun rising. Like the way some green lieutenant who's found himself in emergency field command looks when somebody with higher rank and more experience comes along and the kid finally gets to say 'I stand relieved'. "Okay," it says. "Okay. Yeah. Thanks. I just -- I don't know what to do about any of this."

God, if this had been real, he would have had to hate himself forever, even more than he already does. The fact that his betrayal will lead to no lasting consequence doesn't erase the betrayal itself; it's just another fucking tickmark on the tally of all his sins remembered.

"It's okay," he says. "I do. I still haven't told you everything about all the things I know."

There's a flicker of interest in the snake's face. It almost amuses him, imagining the snake imagining *him* about to betray himself. It gives him a second, to see if he's about to say anything else. When he doesn't, it breathes out, a long whoosh of breath. "Thanks," it says. Acts like it's making itself smile. "Just, you know. Keep me posted. I want to know what you're doing."

"You will," he says. "Don't worry."

You have to take your little amusements where you can find them.

\*

Snake's on the phone when he lets himself into its office. He drops into the visitor's chair and waits. Quiet. Patient. Echo is the

Ba'al warming the chair today; he can tell. Echo's the one that wears t-shirts from ThinkGeek underneath its dress shirt and snazzy suit. He amuses himself by trying to figure out what today's says, squinting at the dark lines beneath the thin white fabric. It's mostly blocked by the snake's tie, but eventually he decides it's "you had me at EHLO".

Concentrating on figuring out the t-shirt keeps him from concentrating on the anger that's bubbling up into his throat, the knowledge that but for the grace of snake he would have been sitting here and wanting to put his head between his knees and puke until there was nothing left to come up.

He watches his body language. Carefully. One knee hooked over the arm of the chair, foot swinging. Proper and precise amount of slouch in his spine. Eyes on the snake, not looking away or around the room. He has to remember he's pretending to be the loyal minion, here to report up to his lord and master.

"I'm certain you have news of scintillating importance to impart," it says to him, once it hangs up the phone. "I'm dying to know what it is."

Pissing off the snake is a game that isn't fun anymore. Never was, really, but he could forget it wasn't, for a little while. "Got a problem," he says.

The snake lifts one manicured eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Virta," he says, his tone clipped and short. "One of the Wunderkinder. He's read the files I lifted from Area 51, and he's put two and two together. He took me out for lunch just now and started dropping lots of hints about how he thinks you know what's going on. He mentioned Clancy. Said he thinks Clancy was about to go blow the whistle to the SGC, which is why you had me kill him. Not that he knows it was me who did it. He was talking about finding somebody to tell, because he thinks he's going to be next, and he wanted me to know because he thinks I'm on the list too. I figured I should find out if you wanted his death to look like an accident or just a disappearance."

He'd toyed with the idea of telling the snake he'd already taken care of the problem -- hey, loyalty and initiative are supposed to be valued qualities in a minion, and he'd have *really* liked to see the snake's face if it thought he'd managed to knock Virta out of the running -- but it would have been really hard to explain, afterwards. Pity. Would have been a lot more fun than sitting through this whole farce.

The snake studies him. If this had been real, he knows he would have been squirming; instead, he concentrates on meeting the snake's gaze, clear and calm. Finally it laughs. "I'm proud of you, Jack," it says. "We didn't think you'd do it."

It's easier than he thought it would be to let a little bit of the anger flash through. "You wanna elaborate on that?" he says.

The snake pushes the intercom button on its desk phone. "Send Virta in," it says, and yeah, okay, he *knows* this is a fucking setup, but his endocrine system's still screaming at him. Thanks, body, got the memo already: we're in danger, you can stop shouting at us. Door opens. Virta walks in. Wanders straight over to the other visitor's chair and sits down. Smiles at him. Same smile the snake's giving him. He can see the similarities now that they're in the same room, and it pisses him off that it took him this fucking long.

"I'm touched, though," Ba'al -- the Ba'al wearing the Ba'al-suit -- says. Clinical. Detached. "So worried about our well-being."

"I'm not touched," Virta says. Cranky and petulant, echoing in the space between them, and no matter *how* many fucking times he hears the fucking snake reverb voice, it still makes his skin crawl. "I'm offended. You were really going to turn me in, after everything we've meant to each other?"

Knowing this was going to happen doesn't change how fucking *furious* he is. He fights for control over his voice. Finds it. "Because you were going to fuck up the plan," he says, and okay, less control than he thought, because it comes out taut and vicious and *pissed* and it fucking feels *good* to snarl a bit. So he keeps going. "And you can take your fucking tests and fold them until they're all sharp corners --"

"Oh, *come* now, Jack," Ba'al says. "You don't think we'd trust you without testing you?"

He folds his hands into fists. His nails bite into the palms of his hands, sharp and burning. "Fuck this noise," he says. And he is pissed, *really* pissed, and it's the kind of anger that comes from three and a half fucking months of being played and manipulated and lied to, and it's enough rage to actually make the snake -- both snakes -- recoil from the intensity of it.

Yeah. Okay. He's got *just* enough presence of mind to remember that he's playing a role here, just enough control to channel the rage into the kind of reaction the role he's playing calls for. But only just.

He stands up. "You," he says, pointing at Virta, "can throw yourself out a fucking window, you fucking liar. And you --" Points at Ba'al. "That's it. I've fucking had it. I've done nothing since I got here but work my ass off for you. And just because I don't leap out of my chair every time you snap your fingers doesn't mean I'm not on your side. I've put up with your suspicions because if I were you I probably wouldn't have believed me right up front either, but you show me one case, just *one* fucking case, of me not being trustworthy. Just one. You're not going to find one. You know why? Because we're on the same side, you stupid fucking fuck. And I'm tired of the tests and I'm sick and tired of the fucking games, so you know what? Put your money where your fucking mouth is. You want my help, you tell me what the plan is. All of it."

And to his surprise, they do.

\*

Downtown Seattle. Job's Cover Makes Some Unavoidable Problems; the snake's expecting him for an assignation after work. But he can take an hour. He uses it to run up to Capitol Hill; the steep streets force him to concentrate on his breathing, his body, his legs. Having something to concentrate on lets him get some thinking done. He stops at Dilettante while he's up there, picks up a box of fucking chocolates. Life is like, etc. Never know what you're going to fucking get.

Yeah.

It's bad. He'd known, *O'Neill* had known, that it was going to be bad. He didn't know how bad it was going to be.

The snake's plan itself is pretty simple, elegant and fiendish in its directness. Step one: establish a totally-unimpeachable presence as a legitimate businessman, *sans peur et sans et-fucking-cetera*. Step two: get one of the Attack of the Clones into Congress and get it maneuvered until it's got fingers in a bunch of pies and snakes in a bunch of key heads. Step three: get the IOA ditto, to lock down the SGC's operations. Step four: get the people who'd be trouble in the SGC reassigned or out of the way, move in its own people.

That part, he'd guessed.

What he hadn't guessed is what happens from there. The snake's not after Earth. Or it is, but only as a means to an end. It's not looking to crush Earth beneath its Italian-leather-clad heel. It doesn't even plan to let anyone *know* it's taken over the planet; no shrines, no temples, no worship. It wants to use Earth's resources, Earth's infrastructure, as a base of operations. Upgrade Earth's technology, 'discover' enough advances, so it can use Earth as Free Parking without tripping anyone's radar, all the while concentrating on its *real* goal.

Because what the snake's really after isn't Earth; it's Earth's *alliances*. All the advanced technology beyond what the Goa'uld already have, all the technology Earth has managed to beg, borrow, or steal (okay, they put it back). The Asgard. The Ancients.

*Atlantis*. (And if the snake actually manages to get a Wraith for a host, they're all fucking doomed. One galaxy. Two. All human life everywhere except for the ones kept penned up as cattle.)

O'Neill had briefed him on bits and pieces of the current playing field Out There. Not much -- his clearance has been pulled (technically, *he* never had it in the first place), and there's only so far O'Neill can talk himself into full disclosure. (Same person. Different person. Yeah, neither one of them has any idea which view the JAG would take if it came down to it, and they've agreed, without ever actually coming out and saying it, that he's going to have to trust O'Neill to tell him the most important stuff, and O'Neill's going to have to trust him to only ask about the stuff that's most important.)

But he's smart, and O'Neill knows how to tell him things in ways that look innocent on the surface, but that he'll be able to put together without much trouble. He's got a bit of a handle on the galactic power situation as it stands. Minor Goa'uld all at each others' throats, everybody *still* trying to step up to fill the power vacuum left by Anubis's defeat. Some new players -- he thinks they're human, but he's not sure; O'Neill's being cagey -- having set up as the Junior Mafia: bootlegged tretolin, various and sundry naquadah supplies, scavenged Goa'uld technology. The Tok'ra. The Free Jaffa. The Not-So-Free-As-The-Other-Jaffa. The Fuck-You-All-We're-Just-Doing-Our-Thing-And-You-Can-Go-Fuck-Yourself Jaffa. The Ancients, still high up on their fuzzy glowy-squid clouds. Bunch of different players. Earth's got the best connections; they've got allies in all the camps that look like they might have a chance of making it to the end of the race.

And the snake wants them all.

Thinks that pulling the puppet strings of the SGC is its route to having them. And it probably would be. He doesn't know what the SGC's been up to in his absence, but he's pretty sure they wouldn't let all that alliance-building lapse. Wouldn't have when O'Neill was in charge, at least. And the people who are still connected, the people he trusts to tell him like it is, are uncomplimentary about Hank Landry's ability to find his own ass with both hands, a flashlight, a map, and a GPS receiver, but *he* knows why O'Neill shoved Landry into the hot seat, and it has nothing to do with Landry being the best of bad choices. It's *because* Hank can't find his own ass without etcetera. Because Hank won't get some cunning and crafty idea into his head and try to implement some new grand vision. But also because Hank will fight tooth and claw to keep the SGC from getting turned into nothing more than a rubber-stamp division of the IOA, because that would take Hank's own private kingdom out of his hands.

Protection via incompetence. In the absence of a better candidate -- and O'Neill couldn't have stayed, for reasons he understands completely, and Daniel didn't want the job, despite being enough of a cold-hearted bastard (and he means that with the greatest affection possible) to do it, and that means there were no better candidates -- Hank's good enough.

Hank wouldn't have gotten it into his head to screw their allies, especially not with Reynolds there to lean on him. (Should have been Daniel. But Daniel's called it quits, thrown in the towel, broken against the shoals. Been chewed up and spit out, like so many good men.) But Hank's not smart enough to spot a long con when he sees it, and *really* not smart enough to spot a snake in human clothing. And Daniel's on Atlantis (diminished and gone into the West, to remain Daniel). Carter's at Area 51 and Teal'c is with the Free Jaffa, and both of *them* hang around often enough to possibly be trouble for the snake's plans, but not enough to be trouble *immediately*.

The snake's been careful. (Crafty. *Subtle*, and snakes aren't subtle, and that makes him fucking nervous, because who the fuck knows if this is the *real* plan or just the next layer in the onion?) It's built a little empire (out of some crazy garbage called the blood of the exploited working class; oh, yeah, because what he *really* needs right now is Mitchell's fucking crap taste in music polluting his mental mp3 player -- *don't fucking think about Mitchell*) and if it tends that empire carefully, it can go undetected for a long time. Years. More. All it has to do is lock down the key players under its own control, find enough loyal minions to do the things a snake can't and talk to all the people who'd be able to detect snakehood.

Minions like the loyal minion he's playing. And that thought makes so *much more* of this make sense, because the snake is going to need good people, capable people, to run the various bits of the Evil Empire for it, sure, but more than that, it's going to need people who are going to be able to lend the whole crazy thing *legitimacy*. The Asgard fucking love O'Neill. How would they react to being told that O'Neill had a tragic accident, but the SGC had brought his clone in to help run things? Fuck, it would fly.

If the snake has its way, nothing's going to change at all but who's calling the shots. Earth's halfway to being the new benevolent dictators of the galaxy anyway. The Fifth Race. Only thing that's kept them from making more progress than they have in the short time they've had has been the internecine power struggles coming from the right hand not knowing what the left hand's doing. With a snake in the master seat, that all evaporates. And if the snake does it slowly enough, carefully enough, in ten years the galaxy will look around it and realize that they've got a new Evil Overlord and *nobody even noticed*.

They are so fucking fucked.

He's composing the message to O'Neill in his head as he runs back over Broadway, loops across Pine, under the freeway. This is going to be a bitch to slam down into something short enough to pass along. The fucking encipher alone is going to take days. The snake's going to be watching him now, even more closely. Make sure he's worthy of that trusted-lieutenant status he's been offered.

Offered him the job of First Prime. ("Thanks," he'd said. "No tattoo. Got my own. And I'll pass on the snake in the gut thing, too.") Didn't say yes. Didn't say no, either. Out of character to accept immediately, but he's starting to think maybe the snake hadn't fucking been joking when it had teased him about offering him the job, way back at the beginning. There's something a little bit pathetic about the fact he's starting to think the fucking snake values him *for* his independence. For his ability to think clearly, without the heritage of centuries of kree'ing on command. For his ability to come up with ideas and plans *without* having to get permission to think first.

It says something about the state of the galaxy when the only people you can trust as your henchmen are clones of yourself and the nineteen-year-old clone of a guy you once tortured to death over and over for a few weeks. You just can't find good help these days.

The worst part of it is, he can't think of the next logical thing to do. He'd recommend a plan of attack -- literal or metaphorical --

to O'Neill in his next message, except he can't figure out what makes the most sense. He *still* doesn't know how many Ba'al-clones are running around out there, nor does he know if Seattle is the snake's only base of operations on Earth (doubtful), if Ba'al has other strongholds across the galaxy (likely), or if all of the clones are present on Earth at any given time (unlikely). The need to salt the ground behind him is no less pressing now than it was when he came under; if he can't take them all out at once, better to take none of them out at all.

Stay put and keep feeding back intel? That would be the most logical route for O'Neill to order: set up channels out, secure and uncompromisable, double-blind in the event of disaster, and tell him to go to town, keep him there as long as possible, trust him to make his own escape if and when the situation heats up to the point where his cover is about to be blown. It's what he'd do, if he were in O'Neill's shoes.

It's also not what he signed up for.

He'd told O'Neill: one op. Six to nine months. They'd agreed it shouldn't take longer. Get in, figure out what was going down, get out, blow everything to Kingdom Come. And sure, no plan survives the first encounter with the enemy, and he'd warned Mitchell (*don't think about Mitchell*) that it could take longer, but when he'd said 'longer' he'd been thinking a year. Fourteen months, tops. He's got a life. He's got a job. He's got a *family*. All things he's tried like hell not to throw in O'Neill's face more than he needs to, because O'Neill doesn't have either and knows he's not going to be able to, not while he's still on this job. For O'Neill, the job comes first.

He's spent months, *years*, learning how not to be that guy. That guy who lives for duty and responsibility, that guy who goes to bed every night in a cold and lonely room knowing that he's done his part for God and Country. Because he has to. Because nobody else can. Because *someone* has to, and that someone is him, and he's stood up in front of God and Country and raised his hand and repeated the words: *support and defend, foreign and domestic, true faith and allegiance, without reservation or purpose of evasion* --

Thirty-eight years. And some of it was good, and some of it was bad, and some of it lives in places he won't ever touch again unless he needs to -- until he needs to -- but it *made* him. It took him months, *years*, to come to terms with the fact that all of it, even the parts he never wanted to live through and never wants to live through again, are what built him. Built O'Neill. Can't walk away. Can't set it down. Can only let it sleep for a little while.

The only reason he could let himself stop being Jack O'Neill, let himself make himself *himself*, had been because O'Neill had been there to keep the faith. To carry the weight. And this is something O'Neill can't do and he *can*, and if he doesn't find another way through to an ending, he'll have to. The bitch of it is, the stone cold fucking bitch of it is, if he has to do it, he will. And he knows O'Neill knows it. He'll do it, and he'll do it well, and he'll see it through, and he'll walk straight away from the life he'd managed to build and straight back into the life of duty he'd walked away from once already.

Because he has to. Because nobody else can. Because *someone* has to, and that someone is him, and no matter how much mental yoga you do to make yourself into your own person, an oath doesn't cease binding you just because you're not the same person you were when you took it. Nobody's the same person they were forty years ago. Ten years ago. Ten days. He'd been able to let himself put it down for a while because O'Neill had been there to hold it for them both. He should have known that grace wouldn't last forever.

God, please, just let him be able to see Mitchell one more time.

But he's putting the cart before the horse that the barn door was shut on as Nero fiddled, or something like that, and he's got a snake to smile pretty for, a snake waiting for him to show up and pretend to be everything he's not. So he charges blindly ahead, running, always running, never a chance to stand still.

Downtown Seattle. Home sweet fucking home.

\*

Later on, when he lets himself back into his apartment, bruised and filthy and sweaty and sore (thank fuck Echo never expects him to stay put, *after*), there's a snake sitting on his couch. Feet up on the fucking coffeetable. Reading a book. Eating the fucking box of chocolates.

Fucking snake.

He slams the door behind him, harder than he should. It makes the tchotchkes on the entryway table rattle and dance. "What the fuck do you want?" he snarls. "And get your fucking feet off my table."

The snake doesn't look up from its book, but it does take its feet down from the table. "I'm surprised you haven't thrown those hideous knick-knacks out the window yet," it says, absently. Turns a page. "Would you like to? I'd be happy to help you cart them up to the rooftop garden. We could have a contest to see who could throw them further."

He closes his eyes and counts to twenty. When it doesn't help, he recites the prime numbers from one to a hundred. In Polish. "Get your goddamn hands out of my box of chocolates," he says. "You hate chocolate."

"They hate chocolate," it corrects. "I'm rather fond of it. Go take your shower. I'm sure you'd like a chance to get clean."

"Would be fucking nice," he snarls, and -- because he knows better than to think he's going to win an argument with a snake, especially *this* snake -- he goes to take a fucking shower.

When he gets out of the shower, he inspects his bruises in the mirror. Nothing that won't heal; Echo is one of the ones that always forgets its snake strength and snake power while it's fucking him, and that makes him think of Virta and wonder how long it took for Virta to learn how to control itself, wonder how much the snake just retreated and let the host take point, and *that* just pisses him off even more.

He can still feel the snake's hands on his skin. Some people would want to cover themselves up, he knows -- hide their bodies away behind baggy clothes, reach for safety and security by drowning themselves in fabric -- but he fucking hates anything around his wrists and throat. Having to keep himself covered, keep his ink covered, has just been contributing to the constant state of low-grade *pissed* he's been in this whole time. (When he hasn't spiked from pissed to furious, that is.) So he pulls on sweatpants and a tank top, stalks barefoot back out into the living room. The snake's still reading. It left him two of the chocolates. How fucking generous.

"Have a seat," the snake invites. Makes him want to keep standing, just to prove he *can*, but that sort of childish foot-stomping is beneath him. Or should be, at least. He sinks down into *seiza* again, on the floor, same spot he picked last time. Ass on his heels. Palms on his thighs. Knees together. *Breathe*.

The snake dogears the page to keep from losing its place and sets the book aside. It lifts a finger, gestures towards its own ear; it

takes him a second before he realizes what it means. *Earpiece*. He keeps fucking forgetting he's wearing it. He takes it out. Tosses it onto the coffeetable; it clatters as it hits. The snake leans forward, its elbows on its knees, its hands dangling freely. "I'm sorry," it says.

Last fucking thing he would have expected to hear out of the snake's fucking mouth. "For?" he demands.

If he didn't know better, he'd say the expression on the snake's face is something akin to sympathy. "For the fact that the one person you'd thought you were developing a genuine friendship with turned out to be waiting to betray you. I would have told you sooner, if I'd been certain that your role *was* a role, rather than waiting until it became urgent and pressing that you know. For that, I'm sorry."

It creeps him the fuck out. Snake shouldn't be able to sound so genuinely regretful. "Still not sure why you think I'm playing a role *now*," he says. He isn't -- quite -- trying to convince the snake that he's genuine; that ship's already sailed. But he's already fucking had his nose rubbed in the fact that he's fucking up, and as much as he hates the idea of taking directions from a snake, if he's fucking up in *other* ways, it would probably be a fucking good idea to know *how*.

The snake smiles, just a little. "Because you haven't betrayed me. I took a chance; I'm glad I did. I suppose it's tacky to say 'thank you for not blowing my cover', given the circumstances, but I also suppose I should."

This is more than a little surreal. He spent ten years or so setting his course by one solid and unswerving fact: the Goa'uld are power-mad, psychotic megalomaniacs. This one isn't. Or it does a fucking damn good impression of not being, at least, and he'd *really* like to know why. "What made you start to suspect?" he says. "Originally."

He barely notices, until the words are out of his mouth, that he's tacitly coming clean.

The snake cocks its head, purses its lips. Considers. "I had been uncertain about your motivations from the time you arrived," it finally says. "We all were. You did an excellent job of alleviating those suspicions. For me, though, I decided your role was a role that first morning I joined you on your morning run. Before you knew that we were legion. Do you remember? I offered you the use of the sarcophagus, and you declined."

He tries to ignore the surge of *want* that the sarcophagus's mention kicks up in his chest. "I remember," he says. Neat, clipped. He hadn't realized that had been Delta. Looking back at it now, it's obvious.

The snake nods. "Your reasons for saying no were excellent reasons. I couldn't say what made me realize they were an excuse. Something about the sound of your voice, the look on your face. You know what the sarcophagus can do, and you wanted to say yes, and you knew you couldn't. Because you knew that you wouldn't be able to control yourself, if you did." The look on its face makes him want to bend over, rest his head on his knees. He *knows* that wanting. He shouldn't have points of commonality with a fucking snake. "I suppose it made me sympathize."

He can feel his fingers tightening on his thighs. He makes himself uncurl them, spread them out, resting quiet and undisturbed. "You don't use the fucking box," he says. Not quite a question. Not quite a statement. He has a really fucking hard time believing that the snake *doesn't*, but he *knows* that look. It's the look of someone who'll always be an addict, talking about the monkey he'll always be vulnerable to. The monkey he's decided isn't going to be allowed to win.

"No. Not when it isn't absolutely necessary, at least," it says. "And absolute necessity is much more rare than one might think. My compatriots are less willing to tolerate any form of physical imperfection for even the length of time it would take to conduct repairs. I grew to realize that the easy way out was causing more harm in the long run. It's not easy. But it's worth it. Or so I believe." It makes a face, its mouth twisting into a rueful expression. "It's certainly set me apart from the others. Whether that's a good thing or a bad thing depends on your point of view, I suppose."

It stands up. Crosses the room and disappears into the kitchen. (He barely notices that his subconscious sentries don't twitch as it passes him.) "I could try to convince you that I'd had a change of heart and was ready to spend the rest of my life rescuing puppies and helping little old ladies across the street," it says, raising its voice just enough to be heard over the pass-through. He can hear the sound of the refrigerator opening, closing again. "I could probably manage to convince you, given enough time. But we don't have enough time, and the time for pretense is over. I have absolutely no desire to become some sort of tiresome moral crusader righting the wrongs of society. But I have no interest in subjugating humanity, being worshipped as a god, or ruling the whole galaxy, either. For one thing, it's far too much *work*. I've come to realize that I'd be perfectly content -- what is the expression? Living the high life. Good food, good drink, interesting problems to pick apart and solve. I'm hoping you can live with a mutual non-aggression pact."

It comes back out from the kitchen. Two bottles of beer in its hands. As he watches, it pops off the bottlecaps with one thumb. They're not fucking twist-off caps. Fucking show-off. It holds down a bottle. He takes it and sets it aside, untouched. The snake stays put right where it is, close enough for him to touch, staring down at him.

"You are going to win, you know," it tells him. Clinically. Dispassionately. "Whether you know it or not. Right now, I'm certain it doesn't seem like you will. You're beginning to see the magnitude of the problem you committed yourself to solving, and you can't see an easy way to get out of this without screwing yourself. But what I said last week still holds. Even if you, personally, fail -- and I don't think you will -- your people will succeed. Which is, I suppose, little consolation for *you*, but it's true. And knowing that I'm looking to ally myself with you mostly because I know you're going to win may make you more or less inclined to trust me, but that's true as well. I don't like losing. I never have. For the length of time you're here, I'll help you -- and I can be a considerable help to you. In exchange, I ask only your word that I'll be left to live my life and run my company undisturbed, as long as I don't seek any greater control of Earth or any of its countries."

He's starting to get a crick in his neck from having to look up at the snake; he stops himself before he stands up to face the snake on its level. Petty little power games. Once a snake, always a snake, he supposes.

"What's to keep me from saying yes and then turning around and fucking you once I get out of here?" he asks.

The snake sinks down to the floor, a foot or two away, folding its legs underneath it gracefully. It smiles. Genuine amusement. "The fact that you don't renounce promises," it says. "Not once they've been given. Not unless it's required, in order to uphold something you find even more dear, and even then it torments you. If you give me your word, you'll keep it. Of that, I have full confidence."

He closes his eyes for a few seconds. No snake should know that much about him, and he's not even sure how it *does*. Doesn't want to think of all the little conversations he and the snake had, in an interrogation room halfway across the galaxy. Doesn't want to wonder *when* the snake cloned itself, whether the snake sitting next to him *now* remembers being the snake that was his host for that charming little vacation. He of all people knows how much difference can arise between a clone and the original, how little the continuity of memory can affect the person you become, but he also knows how *much* it can leave marks. He doesn't want to let himself think that the snake's unwavering belief in his own ethical system might stem from the snake watching him die, over and over



again, all to protect a woman whose name he didn't even know.

Lie down with dogs. Rise up with fleas. Fucking *hell*, he's already decided he's going to do this, and now he's just trying to figure out if he's going to be able to live with himself afterwards.

"I don't control things," he says, his voice tight. "I don't have the authority to commit to something like that. I can suggest. I can't make promises. Don't think that I can."

The snake nods, its face serious again. "I know. But you have influence. A great deal of influence, I'm suspecting, else General O'Neill wouldn't have sent *you*. Not with such autonomy. I've watched you carefully, and I haven't seen any evidence that you're receiving instructions or communicating in any way. For you to have that much leeway means that you must have enough authority to make decisions and expect them to be binding."

He supposes that's something to be proud of, that he hasn't fucked up enough for the snake to catch him phoning home. It doesn't make him feel any better.

The snake takes a swallow of its beer. He looks for any sign of smugness that he's taking this proposition seriously in its face. Doesn't find any. That doesn't make him feel any better either.

"I have conditions," he finally says.

No relief in the snake's face, but its shoulders ease, just a fraction. He only sees it because he's looking for it. "Name them," it says.

For a second, he realizes how fucking *insane* this is, two men sitting on the floor of the corporate condo from hell, negotiating the fate of the world. Playing chess with Death. He wants to laugh, wants to beat his fists against his thighs and scream. Can't.

His feet are starting to fall asleep. He shifts his position: *seiza* to *kekka fuza*, folding his feet up onto his thighs, soles turned upwards to face the ceiling. Ticks off his points on his fingers. "One, you give me a list of everything this company controls, and I do mean *everything*, and get rid of anything that was acquired just to fuck with the SGC," he says. His mind is skipping ahead of itself, reaching out for all the moves he needs to make, all the things he needs to get out on the table right now. Somehow he doesn't think the snake will take kindly to having additional clauses added later. "Two, you drop the whole politics thing. No running for public office, no *influencing* the people who are already *in* public office -- with money, with power, anything -- and no trying to buy laws or regulations or anything like that."

The snake's smiling again. Fucking creepy. "I believe the purchasing of favorable legislation is a fine upstanding American corporate tradition," it says. Something must show in his face, because it clears its throat immediately and goes back to serious. "But I take your meaning. Go on."

"Ha ha fucking ha," he says. "Three, no more snakes on Earth. No clones, no underlings, nothing. Period, end of sentence. That includes Jaffa. Non-negotiable. Period. Four, you produce a list of every person you or any of the others have worked with or planted, anywhere in a position of power, and agree that you won't try to replace them once we clear them."

The snake nods. "Yes," it says. "I had assumed. Go on."

He tries to think of the other provisions of the Master Plan that he needs to step on. "Five," he says. "No more offworld tech. No bringing it to Earth, no funneling it into the economy, no leaking bits and pieces of it, no trying to reverse engineer it so that it looks like it was developed here. No buying research, no steering research, no giving or selling hints or clues to anybody doing work in those areas already."

The snake nods again. He doesn't like the way it seems to be agreeing. It isn't that he was expecting more argument, but he was ... expecting more argument, really. And the capitulation doesn't tell him anything. If the snake's motivations are exactly what it says they are, these provisions wouldn't be too much to agree to. If the snake's playing some more subtle game, it would pretend to agree anyway, to put him at ease so it could keep doing whatever the hell it was trying to do.

"Six," he says. "About the rest of the galaxy --"

He stops. The enormity of this comes crashing in on him. Negotiating for the fate of fucking everything. Fucking hell, he's this close to fucking trusting a snake. His instincts are *telling* him to trust the snake. And he's already proven to himself that his instincts about whom to trust are fucking unreliable at best and downright dangerous at worst. His judgment's fucked, plain and simple: lack of sleep, lack of safety, lack of breathing room. He's been playing roles for too fucking long. The longer you stay under, the more you have to question your every fucking move. He *knows* this. He always has. Or had. Since Poland, and beyond.

He cannot trust himself to make this call. (But who *can* he trust?)

He drops his hands. Lifts them again, scrubs them over his face. Delay. He needs room to think. "Not now. Those aren't all my terms. I'll have others. Before I can say yes or no. I need to think. I need to --"

"Yes," the snake says. Picks up both beer bottles, rises to its feet (without needing to pinwheel its arms to gain purchase, too, which just makes him think the fucking thing is fucking showing off). "You're under a great deal of pressure. I would rather have a considered answer. I will tell you that I can agree to the conditions you've offered so far. I know it's difficult for you to believe, but I really have no interest in ruling your world. I've had enough of that; I'd find it miserable. The challenge of ruling a single company is more than enough to keep me occupied for quite some time."

It takes both beer bottles back over to the coffeetable. Sets one down, keeps the other. Drops down onto the couch and arranges itself lengthwise over it, its back against the arm of the couch, its feet and legs across the cushions. Picks up the book again. Looks just like it's settling down for a long winter nap. "I would suggest," it says, clinically, "that you sleep. I can't imagine you've been doing much of that. As long as I'm here, you won't be bothered."

His brain presents him with the image of the snake lying across the foot of his door, loyal and faithful fucking guard dog. *Hereally fucking hates* his brain sometimes. "Yeah," he says, short and clipped, and climbs up to his feet. (And it's *fucking hard* to keep from flailing his own arms for balance as he goes, but he fucking manages.) He reaches over and picks up the box of chocolates up from the coffee table. Puts it on the counter between the kitchen and the living room. "And if I wake up and find that you fucking ate those," he says, "I'm going to fucking kill you with the *power* of my *mind*."

The snake laughs. Actually laughs (fucker), and he wants to lunge across the coffeetable and wrap his hands around its throat, and he *can't*, because he's half a step away from shaking on a fucking *deal* with it.

He thought it would take him a long fucking time to fall asleep, knowing the snake is sitting out there. Waiting. But no. He's out

like a light no more than five minutes after he strips down bare and climbs between the sheets, and he sleeps like the fucking dead.

\*

Downtown Seattle. A rare and lovely April day out there. One of the ones that are bright and clear, the warmth of spring, the first promises of summer glinting far-off on the horizon. He lopes instead of running, a desultory loop around downtown: Jogging Can Mitigate Some Unpleasant Pains. (When this is over, *if* this is over, he's going to have to shin splints for *months*. There's a fine line between aggressive physical conditioning and masochism-via-exercise, and he's got a feeling he can't even see the line in the rear-view mirror anymore.)

Saturday. He's got the deck of cards in his pocket, a backpack full of the work and the laptop he's allowed to bring out of Farrow-Marshall HQ to use for cover, and the next message to O'Neill in his head, waiting to be enciphered; he's planning on hitting the library, holing up in its bathroom to do the majority of the work. But just as he's dropping a folded dollar bill into the tip-jar at the coffee shop (second number even, because this is the textbook definition of 'heating up') and turning away with his latte, someone bumps into him and sends him and his coffee flying.

He'd had his backpack off his shoulders and open to shove his wallet into it, and it goes flying, scattering papers everywhere; his laptop skids out from the interior pocket it lives in. A gasp from the girl who slammed into him. (Twentysomething. Short hair, spiked with mousse, dyed an unnatural shade of black. Freckles across her face. Fresh and still-unhealed piercings in her nose and in her eyebrow. The slightly-too-straight posture of someone who's used to standing at attention. Been so long that he can't remember her fucking name, but he knows precisely where he saw her last.)

She crouches down next to him immediately and starts helping him shove the papers together. "I am so *sorry*," she says. "Oh my God. I can't believe I did that. I am such a klutz. My momma always told me I'd been raised by wolverines."

He reaches out a long arm and snags the laptop before someone steps on it. "It's all right," he says. "Partly my fault. My mother always told *me* she was going to sell me to the circus if I didn't watch where I was going."

She laughs. "Yeah, I, uh." They both rise to their feet. He grabs a handful of napkins off the counter to drop on the floor and sop up some of his spilled coffee. "Is your laptop okay? Oh, God, I'd feel awful if I broke it."

"Should be fine," he says. He balances it on one palm, pops the lid; it clicks, whirrs, presents him with the login screen. "Looks okay, at least. You're off the hook."

"Here. Let me --" She flips open the messenger bag she's carrying, fishes around in it, comes up with a piece of white cardstock. "This is my business card. If you find that it's busted when you get it home, call me, all right? I have a good insurance policy. I can pay to have it fixed for you."

He glances at the card -- name, phone number -- and shoves it in his back pocket, then takes the sheaf of papers from her and drops it, laptop, and backpack on one of the few tables scattered in the storefront. Starts to rearrange his chattels for re-stowing. "I will," he says, in the tone that means he won't, turning his back on her: dismissal.

He waves off her offer to replace his coffee, shoves everything back into his backpack, and sets the straps back on his shoulders. Jogs down to the Market, through one of the top-floor archways, down a few ramps, getting sworn at as he pushes through the crowds. Out one of the back doors marked employees-only, keeping his eyeballs peeled. He drops to a saunter as he walks up Alaskan Way, pacing the waterfront. Up Broad, across Denny, past the permanent mini-carnival that doesn't open until later in the day, past the Godawful music museum building. The long way around. He loops around and enters the Science Center, handing over the price of admission in cash, and accepts the exhibit map. Shoves a quarter in a locker to stow his backpack. Makes sure to remember to pull the earpiece out of his ear and shove it and the phone into the backpack first.

It's Saturday, so it's not deserted, but late April isn't yet tourist season, so it's not overrun. He wanders through the exhibit halls in no particular rush. Butterfly house is pretty; he lingers there for a while, staring at the flutter and dance of all the tiny little winged jewels, until the crowd around him has changed, fully, no fewer than three times.

Then he doubles back on his own trail, heads down to the group entrance, turns down a completely unremarkable grey and deserted corridor, turns again, and settles himself by the bank of pay phones. Fishes the business card out of his back pocket. Dials the phone number on its face.

He keeps himself alert, but not jumpy, watching the corridor's single approach as the phone rings six times, clicks, and then goes dead. No voice mail. Wasn't expecting any. He hangs up, plants his shoulders against the wall, and waits.

Ten minutes later, to the second, he's got his hand on the receiver of the pay phone, lifting it just as it's starting to ring. "Yeah," he says.

No question about who it is on the other end of the phone, so O'Neill doesn't bother identifying himself. He can hear a soft mechanical whine beneath O'Neill's voice; not the Asgard jammer, that's soundless, but something to prevent someone with a directional microphone from picking up anything useful. It's not perfect -- technology can minimize the chance of anyone eavesdropping, and he knows O'Neill will have made prior arrangements to be able to use a land line that's relatively low-risk for man-in-the-middle, but if anyone's still keeping tabs on him, he's sunk. Still. He doesn't think he's been followed; he's pretty sure he's gotten the knack of spotting surveillance, and he *knows* his clothes aren't bugged. (Or thinks he knows. Snake told him so. All comes down to whether or not he can trust the snake.)

"We're pulling you," O'Neill says. "Can you get to the Greyhound station without being tailed?"

"Hell you are," he says. It's quick. Automatic. Nothing's changed; if he leaves without locking the doors and stacking the chairs on the tables behind him, he's going to be looking over his shoulder for the rest of his unnatural life. "Unless you're calling to tell me that you're nuking Seattle tomorrow, I'm staying put."

"Don't be stupid," O'Neill counters immediately. He breathes, deeply, from the pit of his stomach, fighting down the automatic impulse to counter attack with attack. Won't serve anyone if he can't keep control of his emotions. "Intel we're getting says you're in trouble. I want you out of there before you get hurt."

He pinches the bridge of his nose. Headache. Again. Still. "Don't be stupid," he says, wearily. "I'm more use here, and you know I don't give a flying fuck about my own safety. And all the arguments against leaving without things done still stand. Even you can't protect --"

*My family*, he starts to say. Cuts himself off. O'Neill hears it anyway. "All right, fine," O'Neill says, sounding annoyed; "I want you out of there before you finish going native on me, dammit."

Spike of anger. Spike of irritation. He breathes through them both. "I'm going to pretend you didn't just say that," he says. "Took you this long to figure out it was me who did Clancy, did it? Or is it that you just found out that *I'm* the one taking point on the negotiations for Ressler-Szdinski? Come on, that started back in fucking February."

"Well, I wasn't exactly *looking*," O'Neill snaps, and then pauses. He can hear O'Neill stopping himself, breathing, calming himself down. Too alike for their own good; too different for common ground. "Okay. Yeah. Low blow. But I'm serious about wanting you out of there. Mitchell will kill me if I let you get killed."

The stab of pain at the mention of Mitchell's name (*don't fucking let yourself fucking think about Mitchell*) is completely unexpected. Completely overwhelming. The stab of anger -- that O'Neill is taking responsibility for *his* actions, *his* choices, speaking as though this is O'Neill's plan and he's just the puppet without any control of the situation -- isn't unexpected at all. But he should have known. O'Neill's all too quick to blame himself for the actions of *anyone*. Not just him.

"My shit," he snaps. "My choices. Not yours."

"My command," O'Neill snaps right back.

"I think you know how much that's bullshit," he says. Then stops himself, because the last thing they need right now is a war over who's got the bigger dick. Especially when, hello, stupid question. "Okay. Backing up. Starting over, without the sniping. I'm close to having a chance to stabilize the situation. Decisively. If you guys can say the same, I'm out of here. If not, I'm staying put. I was on my way to put together a package for you, yell for another pair of hands, but since I've got you on the line, I'll do it quickly, verbal."

"Quickly," O'Neill agrees. "And no. We're still trying to track down enough information to be comfortable making a move. The intel about the cloning really threw us for a loop."

He snorts. "You think it threw *you* for a loop?" he says. "Try being right there when they decided to drop it on me. Okay. Quickly. Don't fucking interrupt."

It doesn't take him long to summarize the high points; he'd already composed the message in his head, after all. He drops it in O'Neill's lap as quickly as possible, tap-dancing over the surface of most of the sticky parts. O'Neill takes the news of Delta's break from the ranks about as well as he'd been expecting, which is to say, not well at all.

"You can't possibly be thinking of trusting a snake," O'Neill says, firm and flat.

He's been on the phone long enough that he's starting to get nervous, even tucked away back here in the corridor where he can watch all the approaches, and nerves always make him cranky. "Trust, no," he snaps. (Only a little twinge about lying. What O'Neill doesn't know can't hurt him. Unless he's wrong, of course, and he's about to gift-wrap Earth and hand it over to the snake with a ribbon tied around it, in which case what O'Neill doesn't know can hurt him plenty. But he's not going to get any sense out of O'Neill if he makes a full confession, and it's easier to get forgiveness than permission; that's one axiom he and O'Neill both still hold dear.) "Use, yes. I can have this cleaned up in a month if you don't get in my way." He pauses, reconsiders. "Six weeks, tops, just to be on the safe side. Can you hold your end until then?"

There's a pause. He knows it for O'Neill running possibilities, turning ideas over in his head. "Yeah," O'Neill finally says. "The President's getting touchy, but I think I can hold him. If you're sure."

"I'm sure," he says. "Now here's the part you're not going to like."

O'Neill's voice turns wary. "What part's that?"

"The part where I tell you what I need you to do."

Takes a few minutes to rattle off the list. A couple of vials of symbiote poison. A second pair of hands. A cover story to explain things, which is going to take moving heaven and fucking earth to get everything arranged properly, and oh, when this is over, Mitchell is going to kill him if Momma doesn't beat him to it. (*Don't think about --*) A couple of sets of spare ID, just in case. A gradual, but complete, cessation of the SGC's (mostly unsuccessful) attempts to root out Ba'al's strongholds across the galaxy. A backdoor into the SGC itself, not just Groom Lake, and not a honeypot, either: the actual system. A list of everything he needs to find when he gets there.

He was right; O'Neill *isn't* happy. Especially since -- he thinks -- O'Neill can put together bits and pieces of what, precisely, he's planning. But he finally snaps, "For God's sake, Jack, don't fuck rule one," and O'Neill shuts up. Rule one is don't jog the elbow of the agent on ground. And he knows O'Neill fucking knows it.

"You know that if you fuck this up, we're screwed," O'Neill says, soft and vicious. "All of us. Everything."

He catches himself grinding his teeth. "Believe it or not, yes, I do happen to be aware of that fact."

There's a fractional pause from the other end of the line. He tries to suppress the itchy, crawling sensation between his shoulderblades; he's been off the grid for *far* too fucking long. "Dammit," O'Neill finally says. Capitulation. Should feel like more of a victory than it does. "Dammit. All right. If you're wrong, I'll kill you myself if the snake doesn't beat me to it. Are you sure your guy's up for this? Got a backup for if he says no?"

"He won't say no," he says. Calm, assured. Sounding like he knows what the fuck he's doing. He knows O'Neill will only hear the calm, the confidence, and never suspect the nerves behind it. "Trust me. But no, I don't have anyone else in mind. If you have someone who's clean on paper, not connected with the SGC at all, send them. If you've got them. If not, I can muddle through without the help."

"I really don't," O'Neill says, reluctantly. "But I'll try. All right. Got anything else?"

"Yeah," he says. Talks fast, before he can talk himself out of it. "Tell Mitchell I miss him, I love him, and the only way I'm not coming back to him is if this gets fucked beyond repair, and if that happens, I'm gonna be thinking of him all the way up to the end."

He hangs up before O'Neill can react. O'Neill will bear the message, he knows. Faithfully. It's not fair to lay it at his feet to carry, but it's the only way he can get the knowledge to Mitchell, and if he's not coming back from this one, he wants to be sure Mitchell knows he was loved beyond all shred of a doubt.

\*

He slides through the elevator doors just as they're halfway closed on Delta, turning his hips to shimmy into the narrow gap. "Going to lunch without me?" he says. "I'm hurt."

The snake's eyes are interested. "I had been planning on taking a drive, actually," it says, and if it had been planning that before he showed up, he'll eat his fucking laptop. "Would you care to join me?"

He bares his teeth. It's not precisely a smile. "Love to," he says, bright and false and cheerful. "It feels like so long since you and I have gotten a chance to be alone together."

Still not ready to say yes or no. But there are a few things he needs the snake to do for him.

---

**v. may**

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*and when i let him in, i feel my stitches getting sicker  
i try to wash him out, but like she said: the blood is thicker  
i see my mother in my face, but only when i travel  
i run as fast as i can run, but jack comes tumbling after  
-- The Dresden Dolls*

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to avoid providing a full briefing to my control officer as i felt that personal concerns would override the practical consideration of said proposal and believed that i would be better-equipped to evaluate the merits of the proposed plan.

i am fully aware that these actions exceed the scope of my mandate, and i acknowledge that, by considering such plan, i am eligible for prosecution under 18 U.S.C Â§ 2381. i also acknowledge that due to my unique circumstances, i am eligible for prosecution under article 106a of the UCMJ, despite my technical status as a civilian. my sole defense against such charges is that all actions i took during the course of this operation were taken in the service of my country and my planet, to the best of my ability, and in my best judgment. should this defense be inadequate in the face of the actions i took and the actions i considered taking, i willingly submit myself to prosecution under and the consequences specified by the aforementioned jurisdictions. i accept and acknowledge the gravity of the charges i am potentially eligible for, and i will not plead mitigating circumstances beyond defense of earth's long-term safety and security. i also wish to state that i take sole and personal responsibility for the actions undertaken on this mission; it was my command and they were my decisions. my actions should reflect upon no one but myself.

the first two weeks of may were unremarkable until the arrival of the

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*Two ribs cracked. He can tell by the pain when he breathes in too deeply, so he doesn't breathe deeply. Hasn't for a while. Wouldn't want to anyway. This place smells like a sewer, like the sewer that it is. He smells like a sewer, shit and piss and blood, and all he wants is to get clean, and he knows he --*

Ma ba'araf ishi thani [*I don't know anything else*], he says, through lips that are puffy and swollen. (*ad-Douri always hits him in the face: bakasir snanak, ta'ala mus zobry. [I'll break your teeth, come suck my cock.]*)

*It doesn't stop the blows. Bitfakir mabta'araf, bes bta'araf. Bes hatha o bawagif shway [You think you don't. But you always do. Just one more piece and I'll make this stop for a while --] --*

Lieutenant Colonel Jack O'Neill, he says. *The words blur in his mouth. He doesn't even remember what language he's speaking anymore. Estoy Americano, de Fuerza Aérea de Estados Unidos, nada más [I'm American, from the US Air Force, nothing else], I won't say anything else --*

*But ad-Douri drives a fist into his stomach, and he's gasping Eyreh be afass seder emmak [My dick in your mother's ribcage], and the world is tilting, spinning, as he pitches over, clinging to a zipline, feeling the pull of eight, ten Gs, and Cromwell's face is calm as he lets go, falls (the enemy/Gate is down) and everything is white, white and sound --*

-- and someone pins down his shoulders, sharp rough shock --

He comes awake quickly, between one piece of horror and the next. The snake's leaning over him. One hand on each of his shoulders, bearing him down into the mattress, holding him tight. His throat hurts. He must have been screaming.

"You were dreaming," the snake says.

He wets his lips. "Yeah," he says. Voice scratchy. "Got that. Thanks."

The snake lets him go. No reason not to. He's awake now. No more screaming to disturb its little book group night. He expects it to go back to the living room, curl back up on his couch and keep doing whatever the fuck it does all night on the nights he hasn't been summoned elsewhere. (It's like having his own fucking pet gargoyle. Except it eats all the chocolate. And he suddenly can't keep ice cream in the place for more than a night. He doesn't think about that too closely.)

But it doesn't go anywhere, just looks down at him, face lit and shadowed by the city lights streaming through the open window. "Do the dreams come often?" it asks.

He isn't exactly prepared for an evening of *sharing*. "Often enough," he says, short and sharp. "Thanks for the rescue. Don't let me keep you from whatever you were doing."

It keeps staring at him. For a minute he thinks it might pull off its shirt, its pants, and climb into bed with him. Some people have teddy bears; he apparently has a teddy snake. But no, it only nods. "May your dreams be untroubled," it says, and turns away.

Takes him a long time to fall back to sleep.

\*

Downtown Seattle: Just Come Making Safety Utterly Plausible. (He's running out of ideas.)

Beautiful fucking day. Not the weather -- that's the familiar grey-and-rainy, April having given way to May. (Cruellest month, lilacs out of dead land, memory and desire. Yadda.) But his heart's more easy as he runs it anyway: down First, around the ballparks, back up along Fourth, following the split to Second. He always feels better once he has a plan. Light at the end of the tunnel.

Of course, given his luck, it's an oncoming fucking train. People always used to call SG-1 the luckiest damn bastards alive, and nobody would ever listen when they said no lucky person would ever go through half the shit they went through. People at the SGC wanted, *needed* to believe in good luck, so they concentrated on the miraculous escapes and never stopped to think about the shit-ass luck that made the miracles necessary. Human nature. He doesn't believe in luck, but if he did, his would be abysmal: Murphy's killed more Gate Team members than e'er snake could hope to match, and maybe the fact that he wasn't one of them has used up all of the quota of luck he was assigned for a lifetime.

Spring. (*Since to look at things in bloom, fifty springs are little room --*) His own personal Longest Winter is coming to a close, but that doesn't mean he's out of the woods. Not an ending yet, so he can't let himself start to think of it as one. Not even into the endgame yet. Barely into midgame, and he's got nothing on his side of the board but knights and pawns, and he still has to take it all the way down to mate in two without his opponents realizing they're walking into a trap until after it's started to spring shut behind them. Can't get cocky. Can't let it *make* you get cocky. It's only a plan. It's not a victory. Not yet.

He should have made the offer to O'Neill. He should have suggested he stay. Sleeper agent. Special reconnaissance. He's trained for it; he's here. Opportunity of a lifetime to get someone inside the snake's plans, to make sure nothing's been missed and nothing's going to get screwed if and when he decides to blow it wide open. He should have made the offer. It's the smartest thing to do right now. He didn't.

And O'Neill didn't think of it, didn't mention it, either. That worries him. Once upon a time, O'Neill would have; he knows this. (Once upon a time, he *had*; assigning good men, brave men, to live far from home and family, to risk their lives in service to their country, and every time the casualty reports came back from behind the lines he'd seen their faces in his dreams.) He doesn't know why O'Neill didn't. Would O'Neill have, if it had been any other operative behind the lines? Would O'Neill have, if it had been any snake but the snake he's facing?

How much of this is personal?

He can't know. And he's selfish enough, *tired* enough, that he didn't suggest it, and now the window's closed. He's bringing someone else in. Someone else under. His command; his responsibility. His *conscience*. Just another weight to add to all the weights he carries, and once upon a time he'd made those decisions every day and now it's been years, years, and here he is. Long fucking road between Captain O'Neill and here.

Time to walk it again.

\*

And okay, as plans go, this one kind of *fucking sucks*, but it's the best answer he could find. He can't make any final decisions until he gets a fucking *sanity check*. And Mitchell would come running in an instant if he asked, but he's not going to ask and he's not going to give Mitchell a chance to offer, because if Mitchell did, he'd have to say no. So he has to settle for second best.

(Don't think about Mitchell.)

Can't call Carter. Can't call Teal'c. Really can't call Daniel. (The long-distance rates are a bitch.) Any of them would come running, but the snake would never believe it. Snake's going to have a hard time swallowing this one too, but he's been holding this card in reserve. Just in case. *Hey, Rube*.

He wasn't expecting things to move quickly -- there are a *lot* of strings that need to get pulled on the other end -- but apparently O'Neill hasn't lost the ability to get his ass in gear when he has to. Two and a half weeks into May, Ba'al (Echo) and Virta call him down into a conference room on 17, one of the ones HR uses for interviews. He saunters in with his very best fuck-you glare, thumbs hooked through the belt-loops of his jeans, playing irritated and annoyed with every line of his face and cant of his head. "Busy," he snaps. "Can't get anything done with you breathing down my neck."

"Oh," Ba'al says, silken and ornate, "I think you'll rather want to be here for this interview. You'll never believe what we pulled out of the general employment application pool."

The door opens, and he knew it was coming, was *ready* for it, but it still gives him a jolt to see Spencer Griffith walking through the door, wearing a suit and tie, looking nervous.

Easy enough to parley the jolt into shock and disbelief. "*Griffith?*" he blurts. And this is why he asked for Griffith, this is why he *wanted* Griffith, because he knows Spencer Griffith has been sneaking and lying and weaseling out of bad situations since the day he was born, even before he started sneaking and lying and weaseling out of bad situations professionally, and the boy's a damn fine actor; his mouth is hanging open too, and he's gone pale and shaky-looking.

Ba'al and Virta are staring at them both. Virta's watching him. Ba'al's watching Griffith. Looking for authenticity of reaction, he suspects. Whatever he's managing to portray, it must be whatever the snakes were looking for. He can only see Virta relaxing because he's looking for it.

"JD?" Griffith says, sounding distracted and disbelieving. "You -- Uncle Cam's been worried *sick*."

"I take it you two know each other," Ba'al says. Fucking snake. Fucking drama whore. If it doesn't already know the whole story of how they're connected, he will *eat* his fucking laptop.

Gotta pray the cover trail holds up. He hopes it will. It probably will. Carter was the one to paper-trip Griffith, and Carter's fucking good at what she does. And she cares about Griffith an awful damn lot. Gonna have to be careful. If he manages to get the kid killed, he's going to be in a shitload of fucking trouble.

So he puts authenticity into every fucking inch of his performance. Plays for baffled and confused, irritated with just a glimmer of interest, and out of the corner of his eye he can see Virta watching him like a fucking hawk. "Yeah," he says. "Ex-partner's cousin. Supposed to be stationed at Buckley right now, not standing here in a suit and tie. What the fucking fuck, Griffith?"

He sees Griffith's knuckles go white as he folds his hands into fists. "Aunt Sa -- *Someone* found out I had a little business on the side," Griffith says, soft snarl that's all the more effective for being underplayed. He can see Griffith's eyes darting sideways, to the snake. Griffith's face is a textbook fucking study in *how much can I get away with not saying?* "My CO brought me up on charges without listening to a word of my side of the story, I told him to go fuck himself with a cheese grater, he had a few choice words for me in return, I hauled off and hit him, and the next thing I know I'm in the fucking lockup and staring at a general court-martial. Which ended badly, and now I'm on dismissal and waiting for the automatic appeal to utterly fail to overturn the sentence, and I've been kicked out of the family and cut off without a goddamn penny, and thank you so much for being here to screw up the interview for the best job I was likely to be able to get with that hanging over my head. Seriously, are you done fucking this family over yet?"

"Oh," Ba'al says, "really, you'd be surprised at what *doesn't* ruin your chances of obtaining a job offer from this company." It stands up, leans over the conference room table, offering one hand to shake and using the other to keep its tie from dragging on the table. "Kevin Balim. CEO. I'm very pleased to meet you, Mr. Griffith. Your CV is rather impressive."

He watches as Griffith's eyes dart over to Ba'al again, back to him, back to Ba'al. Griffith holds out a hand. Tentatively. It's always fucking sweet to watch a professional at work, he thinks, as Griffith bites his lip. He'd known Griffith would be good, but he hadn't expected Griffith to be *this* good, to be able to psych himself up into faking the subtle autonomic cues the snake can damn well read. "Um," Griffith says, reining in his temper -- visibly, obviously -- and licking his lips. "Sorry. I didn't mean to go off like that."

"Quite understandable," Ba'al says. It's almost looking cheerful. It sits back down, looks over at him. "Jack? I'll defer to your greater knowledge. Shall we continue this interview, do you think, or would you say that Mr. Griffith's skills wouldn't be a good match for the position?"

Griffith looks back over at him, too. "Jack?" he asks, playing a combination of confused and pissed. "I thought your name was --"

"No fucking clue what the position *is*," he interrupts, dropping down into one of the chairs next to the snake. "Next time you want me to sit in on a job interview, you might want to brief me on what we're *hiring* for first. Are we talking entry-level customer service or keys-to-the-kingdom here?"

He hooks one knee over the arm of the chair, lets his foot swing. Stares at Griffith. (Playing *thoughtful* and *contemplative*, and Griffith's playing *baffled* and *slowly-getting-pissed* right back at him. Not a flicker of anything else. Kid's a fucking marvel.)

"We thought we'd buy you a present," Virta says. "You've seemed so overworked lately."

He snorts. Yeah, okay. Maybe his luck hasn't run out yet, because that's better than he'd fucking hoped. He looks back at Griffith. "What'd they do you for?" he demands. "'Side business' covers a whole lot of sins. Mouthing off to your CO wouldn't get you drummed out. Trust me, if it did, I'd've been fucked six ways to Sunday more times than I could count."

Griffith's still staring at him. "You --" he starts, and then shakes himself. "Contraband," he says, tightly. "I needed the money."

He snorts again. "Wanted the money, is more like it," he says. "Always thought there was something not entirely squeaky clean about you. That's not an insult, by the way." He looks back at the snake. "You're willing to take a chance on him, I'll back it," he says. Looks back at Griffith. "Assuming that by 'contraband' you mean that you put together what Carter does for a living and decided to filch some of the blueprints and schematics out of her stuff when she came to the house for visits."



He watches Griffith's jaw drop, admires the neatly-executed doubletake. "You know?" Griffith blurts. "I thought -- I overheard her and Uncle Cam talking, back when Uncle Cam was recovering. And I didn't believe it. But then -- I tossed her stuff, and okay, *I know* what she had with her was classified, but -- you would not *believe* how much I could make by just funneling some of that tech to the right hands --"

"Oh," he says, "I'd believe it." He looks back at the snake. The snakes. "My vote says keep. You're right, I could use a minion. And one with enough balls to fuck with Carter is probably better than I could have asked for. At least I won't have to wastetoo much time breaking him in."

And Carter must have done a damn fine job in back-dating the paper trail (because he *knows* the snake will have fucking checked), and Griffith must be up for a fucking Oscar for his performance with the family -- that's going to take *forever* to clear up later, but hey, on the bright side, there might not *be* a later -- and the whole damn scenario must check out through all the channels the snake's been able to verify, and they must have hit whatever reactions the snake was looking for note-perfect. (Either that, or the snake's handing them more rope. Because that's more luck than he wants to believe in.) The snake nods. "You're hired," it says, to Griffith. Then, to him, "Do be sure to watch what you tell him; I'd hate to have to have him killed after you go through all the trouble of training him."

He flips up his middle finger, shows it to the snake. "C'mon, Griffith," he says, cheerful and chipper. (Not entirely faked. In fact, not faked at all. He hadn't realized just *how fucking much* seeing a friendly face would lift his spirits, even if Griffith *is* giving him a not-entirely-feigned "what the fucking fuck" look.) "Heave-ho. Have I got a story to tell *you*. My office is upstairs." He looks back over at the snake. "How much *is* my budget for paying a minion, anyway?"

"He can have twice your salary," the snake says. (Echo's the one with the sense of humor. He's *still* not drawing a paycheck.) It stands up, signaling an end to the discussion. "I'll have the paperwork sent up for you. Oh, and Mr. Griffith?"

Griffith stands too (conscious assumption of the automatic habit, standing when the superior officer stands, and Griffith makes it seem so unconscious that the snake will never suspect it's deliberate). "Yeah?"

The snake smiles again. "Do be aware I wasn't joking about the having you killed part. Welcome to Farrow-Marshall. I hope you'll find your stay here ... illuminating."

\*

Griffith's smart enough to realize they're being watched as they head back up into his office. He gets the kid settled in the visitor chair, says he'll be back in a second, and ducks over into the break room to pick up two bottles of water. (Coffee's shit up here. He's not gonna serve it to someone he likes.) When he gets back into the office, Griffith's unknotted his tie, and he's looking around himself like he's fallen down the rabbit hole.

"Oh my ears and whiskers," he says, just to fuck with Griffith's head a little -- just to let Griffith *know* to be prepared to have his head fucked with, because he told O'Neill to tell the kid to be ready for anything but he's not sure how much the lesson sank in -- and Griffith's head jerks around. He hands the kid a bottle of water, drops down into the other chair. Griffith's staring at him, like he's something new and scary and terrifying. (And either Griffith's a *damn* fucking gifted actor or the kid's gotten a look behind the mask he's always been careful to wear in front of the family, the mask of calm consideration and not-a-fucking-threat, because the fear and the fascination aren't entirely play-acted.)

"So," he says, getting himself settled in the chair. (There's *just* enough room in these chairs for him to get his legs up beneath him, arrange himself into *kekka fuza* and straighten up his spine.) "You have got to be in *so much* shit right now."

Griffith scowls at him. "Did you maybe stop to think I might not *want* to be your -- what'd you call it? Minion?"

"No," he says, flat and colorless. "Because if you didn't, you already know too much, and the boss would be having me dispose of your dead and lifeless body right now. And that kind of thing *really* would put a fucking damper on my plans for the rest of the afternoon, so it's easier all around if we just don't go there. Okay?" He smiles, wide and insincere, and Griffith recoils a little.

And dammit, he *is* going to have to spend a fuckload of time mending fences after all of this. If there is an after-all-this. Because Griffith's looking wild around the eyes, and no, it *isn't* entirely an act. He can't imagine what O'Neill told the kid, but he doesn't expect it was enough. And even if it was, Griffith's known him for two years as his cousin's lover, and he might have already deliberately shown Griffith that what you see isn't the entirety of what you get, but seeing it in a warm and sunny kitchen is something entirely different than seeing it in the midst of the enemy's stronghold.

But he'd read Griffith's jacket -- he *does* still have a few strings to pull -- and he knows both Griffiths, Spencer and Skipper alike, came to the SGC out of his old unit, the 720th Special Tactics Group. Special Operations. And he doesn't know which programs are still active (it's been a long damn time since he kept in touch; those years are better buried) and he doesn't know what pieces of the messy, messy puzzle Griffith might have already played, but he does know one thing: Griffith might be green, but he's solid.

So he spares a moment of pity -- *sorry, kid, I'll brief you as soon as I can get us somewhere it's safe* -- and keeps to his role. "Okay," he says, cracking open his bottle of water. "Let's start with rule one: the boss is not, in fact, lying when he says he'll kill you if you fuck him over. Or probably have *me* kill you. And I don't want to have to do that. So how about we have a couple of hours of Q&A about how not to fuck the boss over in six easy steps. Then I'll tell you all kinds of bedtime stories about your new role in life, we'll fill out a shitload of paperwork, and I'll go enlist Esmeralda the Wonder Secretary to get your relocation all set up. I want you here full-time by Monday. Any problems there?"

Griffith takes a deep breath. "No," he says, after a second. "No. I'm good. I was gonna go back home, but they wouldn't -- they didn't -- my dad's not talking to me right now, and Aunt Sassy made sure that nobody else would either, so I've just been crashing on a friend-of-a-friend's couch in Denver; I flew out here for the interview on like my last five hundred bucks --"

He wonders how much Sassy Mitchell's figured out about what's going on. He wouldn't put it past her to have put a few things together. He's going to be in so much fucking shit when all of this is over. (Not as much as Griffith is, though.) "Hey," he says. "Relax. It's all good." He smiles -- it's not even entirely fake -- and adds, "Lots of benefits to working here, too. It's not the 'all mortal peril, all the time' channel. We'll get you back to Denver to pack shit up and back out here in style. I've got a corporate AmEx. And the apartment building we'll move you into is right around the corner. Wait until you see it."

Griffith's controlling his breathing pretty tightly. Playing nervous and on-edge. "Sounds good," he says, spot-on impression of trying to keep his voice from wavering and not quite managing to make it. Or maybe it's not an impression. Method acting, perhaps. "I think. Right now I don't know *what* I'm supposed to think."

It's in-character for the role Griffith's playing, but he hears it as honest truth as well. He leans forward. Puts a hand on Griffith's

wrist, squeezes. "Hey," he says again, making his voice warm and comforting. "I told you, it's all good. I'll take care of you. Don't worry."

He hopes Griffith hears it the way he means it. He can't say *I promise* out loud. But it is a promise, whole and entire. He dragged Griffith into this, and that means it's his responsibility and his duty to get Griffith *out* of it in one fucking piece.

"Okay," he says. They're being watched, being listened to -- he must assume this to be the truth -- but he flicks his thumb over the inside of Griffith's wrist before he draws his hand back anyway, sketching the sign. Old SG-1 codes, their personal private shorthand. *All systems go*. He has to hope O'Neill taught Griffith the signs. (Has to stifle the flash of annoyance that anyone else in the world would know them.) "Step one. You already know about the advanced technology thing. Wait until you hear where it *comes* from."

They kill an hour or so while he tells Griffith a lot of things Griffith already knows. Not all of it; he wants whoever's listening to recognize that he's playing ball, wants the snake to guess that he's taking the soft approach. He leaves out the little matter of conquering the world and the galaxy beyond it. Leaves out the snake thing, too. Covers the alien part. Covers the technological advances part. He flat-out says Farrow-Marshall has contacts offworld, heavily implies they're working to get offworld tech into the Earth economy so that everyone can use it. Hammers heavy on how the US government's been covering things up, how the fruits of offworld spoils have been reserved for the rich and the powerful. By the end of it, if Griffith had really come into this as ignorant as he's playing, the kid would walk away thinking Farrow-Marshall was the good guys and the snake was a genuine fucking American fucking hero. It's a wonderful recruitment speech. Too bad it's almost entirely fiction.

"You know about all of this, though," Griffith says. "How do you --"

He flashes Griffith a look. *Back off; that part's out of bounds*. "Yeah," he says. "I do. Let's just say I'm a *little* more connected than you all always thought I was."

By the end of it, Griffith's act has passed through properly shocked and through glimmer-of-interest, and has gone all the way to fully fascinated and fired up at the possibilities inherent in the scenario. Throws out a few ideas here and there. Asks a few what-ifs. Kid's going to do just fine. Griffith's not as experienced as he is, but then again, who is? Kid's not raw, not totally green, just nervous. And hey. Fate of the world, resting on your shoulders? He remembers the days when that made him nervous, too. Griffith's smart enough to see that the fact he asked for the kid specifically, that he trusts the kid enough to hold up his end of the masquerade -- that he's placing his life in Griffith's hands -- as one fucking hell of a compliment. Which it is.

By mutual unspoken agreement, they don't mention Mitchell. He's saving *that* conversation for later.

This is a risk and a gamble of the highest order. But he's banking on something he'd already suspected and Delta had confirmed: the Ba'al collective has enough respect for him now that it thinks he's too fucking *subtle* to pull something like this. Something obvious. Something right out in the open and under its nose. Two members from the same notional family, both showing up in the heart of Ba'al's empire, both claiming to have had changes of heart? Yeah, that one's too unbelievable even for a soap opera; truth is, must be, weirder than fiction. When you've built your reputation for being subtle and crafty, the subtlest and craftiest thing you can possibly do is to be open and blatant. It'll hold. For a little while, at least, and a little while is as long as he needs it to hold.

He hopes. He *has* to hope. (But if you have to hope, you're already fucked, because it means you haven't done everything you can possibly do to control the situation. He has. He thinks. He still has to hope.) Biggest danger right now is twofold: either the snake is going to decide that Griffith's a sleeper agent, order him to kill Griffith to prove that *he's* not, or the snake's going to decide to make Griffith a host. (In which case they're fucked without lube, because the snake knows everything the host knows, and he knows Griffith knows enough of the plan to fuck him if the snake finds out.)

He thinks he's got his bases covered. Hopes. If the snake does suspect, he's pretty sure it would want to tease the process out, let things slip slowly, enjoy the fear and terror for a while before making its move. The snake enjoys interrogation, enjoys *torture*, too much to have it over-and-done-with too quickly. If the snake does suspect, his only sign will be waking up one morning to find Griffith gone and himself facing some unpleasant questions, but he's pretty fucking sure he could get through it unscathed. Delta assures him the rest of the collective has finally come to believe in him. And it would *suck* for Griffith to have to go through it, but he doesn't think the snake would do anything irrevocable too quickly.

He doesn't like what it says that he's able to consider consigning someone to weeks of torture the *better* option.

(*The marvelous thing is that it's painless. That's how you know when it starts.*)

Only a little while longer. End's in sight. Can't let it make you get sloppy, but you can use it to make yourself sharper, better, faster. If you work hard enough, you'll get your reward. (On Earth or as it is in Heaven.) Once this is over, you'll have the time to sit down with the inside of your head and undo all the shit you've done to yourself to get here. Until then, get a grip.

So he listens to Griffith's ideas. (And some of them are damn good, and wouldn't just work for the bad guys, and he wonders how many of them come from Griffith's time with the SGC. He hopes O'Neill will listen to them too when all of this is through; Griffith's too young, too junior, to be put into any position of authority on paper, but the SGC's always had a fine and upstanding tradition of not letting rank or the lack of it get in the way *too* badly, and he hopes Hank hasn't fucked that tradition up.) Scribbles down cryptic notes to himself in his own personal shorthand, and he wishes the snake luck in trying to decipher it; between the fact that his handwriting sucks and the fact that his abbreviations are often *insane*, he hopes it gives the snake a fucking migraine.

Eventually, he sends Griffith downstairs to HR, bearing a hastily-scribbled list of the forms he's to ask for and the things he's to requisition. (Laptop. Desktops. Cell phone. Earpiece. Etcetera. He leaves a note for whatever HR goon's manning the office to send Griffith up the chain until he hits Cocomé; he knows Cocomé will make sure Griffith gets the *special* gear, the stuff the snake has bugged.) Makes him twitch to send Griffith off without any backup, but it has to be done. He sits back, and he waits, and sure enough, the snake's letting itself in not five minutes later.

"An interesting coincidence," it says, leaning against the door-jamb of his office.

He snorts. Rocks his shoulders in their sockets. Unfolds his legs. "Lucky one. Kid's sharp. Good enough that I never actually noticed he was bent, just mildly crooked a little. And that takes talent, let me tell you. You're right; I can use him."

"Ah," the snake says. "But can you trust him?"

He shrugs. "Damned if I know," he says, aiming for 'cheerful' and sticking the dismount. "Which is why I haven't yet. And won't, until I think I can. Give me credit for knowing how to manage my people." He puts his feet up on his coffeetable, folds his arms across his chest. Stares at the snake. "Give me six months with him. I'll deliver you a willing coconspirator or a dead body all wrapped up with ribbons and bows for your Christmas present."

The snake smiles. "You say the sweetest things," it coos. "I'll leave it in your hands. Don't fuck up."

"Not planning to," he says, and means it. But (oh, he hopes, he *hopes*) not the way the snake thinks he does.

\*

Griffith's back in about an hour and a half, earpiece in one ear, carrying a folder full of paper. He's just finishing up the conversation with Esmeralda the Wonder Secretary; he waves Griffith to take a seat.

"Yeah," he says. "Yeah. Thanks. 'Preciate it. We'll call."

Griffith's watching him. He flicks his eyes up from where he's jotting down notes to himself, meets Griffith's eyes, holds them. Just a second. *Yes, we're still on camera. Later. I promise.* Mitchell would have been able to read it. He doesn't know if Griffith can. (*Don't think about -- Hopeless by now.*)

He breaks the connection with one touch to the phone. "Pack your bags," he says, cheerful and chipper. "Wait, you probably already have. We're catching the last flight down to Denver tonight. Leaves in about two hours. The driver will swing us around to your hotel so you can check out and grab your stuff. You have anything down there that won't fit in a few suitcases? I've got the movers on call if we need them."

The stare he gets is vaguely gratifying. He can *see* the instant when Griffith shakes himself, pulls himself back into character. (Fortunately, the blank *what-the-fuck* also fits. Still, Griffith's going to have to get over that pretty damn quickly.) "I don't need help," Griffith says (playing a little confused, a little annoyed). "I'm pretty sure it's not normal for your new boss to fly down with you to pack up your shit and move you."

He snorts. Puts his feet up on his desk. "Please," he says. "Give me some credit here. I just dumped a shitload of very sensitive information in your lap. It's not that I'm saying you're not trustworthy. I'm just saying it's to my advantage to make sure you don't have a sudden crisis of conscience. Or decide to sell me out to the highest bidder." He smiles, wide and merry, and watches Griffith's face go through contortions of shock settling down to anger; the kid is fucking *good*. "Besides," he adds. "You can always use an extra pair of hands when you're moving. You're springing for the pizza and beer, though."

He's got fresh clothes in his backpack, so he won't have to run back to the apartment first; they won't be gone for long. (Pointless trip anyway. Or not pointless, but not the same point anyone else might think it carries.) It runs pretty standard: car-and-driver (Jaffa; they've started to warm up to him a little, but only a little), swing by the Holiday Inn for Griffith to run up the stairs and grab his shit (battered duffel bag, full of things -- if Griffith is smart, and Griffith's smart -- that came from Goodwill and can be left behind if necessary), off to the airport.

He's traveling under Jack Bauerlin's ID again. While Griffith was dealing with the HR army, he'd acquired a second set of papers for Griffith; they proclaim him to be Spencer Gallatin, Jr. Quick and dirty job, but it'll hold enough for TSA scrutiny. While they're at the counter to check in, he pulls his earpiece off his ear, takes the phone out of his back pocket. Shoves them into the front pocket of the backpack and hands it over to be checked as baggage, instead of carry-on. Griffith doesn't need to be prompted to do the same. They walk through security empty-handed; on the other side of the screening area, he buys two bottles of water, a book of sudoku puzzles, and the first book he sees where the author's name is larger than the title in gold leaf foil on the cover.

They're seated in first class, of course. Near-full plane. He booked the last two first class seats.

He knows once again he was right to pick Griffith when Griffith doesn't break character once, not even when they're on the plane and seated. He hands Griffith the book, keeps the sudoku for himself. He's just finishing up the last of the easy puzzles when the pilot calls prepare-for-takeoff, and he closes his eyes and tries to gauge the pilot's skill by the subtle cues shuddering through the frame of the plane.

The ten-thousand-foot bell dings just when his subconscious tells him it's about to. He reaches forward into the seatback pocket, pulls out both bottles of water, and hands one to Griffith. "We're clear," he says, softly. So softly nobody around them can hear him over the engine noise. "Or as clear as I could get us. Thanks for coming. You have no fucking clue how much I appreciate it."

Next to him, Griffith breathes out, short and sharp. Relaxes like someone who's just been given permission to stand down. "I thought that's why you swung this," Griffith says, equally softly. "Couldn't be sure, though. Fuck, you're terrifying."

His lips twist. Not a smile. Doesn't have to playact right now, but it's hard to drop the habit, after so fucking long. "Yeah," he says. "Sorry about that. For what it's worth, you pulled it off beautifully. Sorry I had to snarl at you so much; the snake has to think I'm on its side. I don't know how much O'Neill told you?"

His look, his inflection, makes it a question. "We didn't have time for much," Griffith says, as an answer. "He's working under the assumption that he's being watched most of the time, and I know he took steps to block the surveillance, but he didn't want to push it *too* long. I got bits from him, bits from Aunt Sam. She says to tell you the system's crackable now, by the way. And General O'Neill says to tell you that he couldn't get you all the time you wanted, but he could get you three weeks, starting now."

Great. He *hates* deadlines. "Okay," he says. "We've got a lot of ground to cover and only a two-hour flight to go over it in. The minute we're off this plane, assume we're being watched until I tell you otherwise. Keep playing it like you're playing it. Now, here's the deal."

He does most of the talking. Instructions. Background. The bits and pieces he's managed to piece together. Griffith listens, nodding, the whole way; he can *see* the mind ticking away behind those blue eyes, memorizing and categorizing and accepting instruction. Takes him halfway through his monologue before he realizes that Griffith's calling him 'sir'. Not the first time, either. Griffith's good at spotting authority, no matter what disguise it's wearing.

They're more than halfway through the flight when he makes himself take a deep breath and get to the real reason he wants Griffith here.

"Here's the deal," he says. "I could have handled the cleanup on this by myself. I brought you in because I needed backup, but not the kind of backup I told O'Neill. And I owe you an apology, because this is me putting you in danger just because I fucked up."

A muscle flickers in Griffith's jaw, but that's the only reaction. "It doesn't matter why you need me," he says. "I came."

He tries on another smile. It's starting to feel a little more natural on his lips by now. "Yeah. I know you did. And believe me, I'm gonna owe you one from now until the end of time, and I am going to move heaven and earth to make sure that my choices don't come raining down on your head. But I called you here because I need an unbiased second opinion, and you know just enough to be able to think intelligently about this and not so much that you've got the same personal shit that I -- that everyone else has."

He curses himself for his slip. Can't be helped. Griffith wouldn't have missed it, but the kid doesn't say anything. Just nods. "Okay," Griffith says. "Go ahead. Hit me with it."

So he tells Griffith about Delta, and about the plan he's considering.

\*

From the minute they're on the ground again, they're back on stage. Even if they're not actually being watched. He doesn't know if they *are* being watched, actually. Could be the snake trusts him enough to be the person being the watching. Could be the snake has them under surveillance to make sure that he's not doing exactly what he's doing. Doesn't matter either way. Griffith's been briefed now, or as briefed as he could deliver in the length of time they had in the air and away (he hopes) from prying ears; Griffith knows how to play it.

He booked them rooms at the Ritz-Carlton overnight. It only takes them a few hours to get Griffith's stuff from the friend's apartment. (Looks like Griffith's been living there for a few weeks. He wonders how fast Griffith got down here and got this set up.) They part at the desk. "Call me if you're going out," he says, and Griffith nods.

When he gets back up into his room and *ssshes* in to check his email, the snake's sent him a login to some internal security system he's never seen before. When he logs in to check it, turns out it's the internal surveillance system. Slick piece of work. Griffith's ID has already been placed on his watch list for him. He clicks through the collection of what information is collected. Turns out he was right; any phone calls made on the company cell phone are automatically recorded (which any idiot could assume), but the earpiece can be turned on remotely and monitored even when the phone isn't active. He doesn't check for his own ID to see whether the snake's still watching over his shoulder; he has to assume the snake is, and more than that, has to assume the system is designed so that any surveillance on an individual is not displayed to that individual. That's how he would design it, at least.

He taps out a quick order for the system to SMS him an alert if Griffith's GPS coordinates change, logs off, brushes his teeth, and goes to bed. Sleeps like a fucking baby, too. About fucking time.

Their flight leaves at 0830. At 0630, a knock sounds on his door. He opens it to find Griffith standing there, fully dressed, holding one of the bags they'd packed yesterday. "Hey," Griffith says. "Got any room in your stuff for some of mine? I don't want to have to make the company pay for me to check an extra bag if you can cram it in with your shit."

"Yeah," he says, taking the bag from Griffith and dropping it on his bed. Griffith hangs back and lets him shuffle things around. Shaving kit on top of the pile of clothes and electronics. He shoves it all the way down into the bottom of his backpack. Griffith jams his hands into his pockets and doesn't let on, even by looking, that he's going to be getting everything back when they get back to Seattle but that kit.

Gotta hope the TSA doesn't decide to take a look. He's pretty sure the symbiote poison has been packed into a container that *looks* innocent enough to pass screening, and if they accidentally discharge it, it won't hurt anybody who *doesn't* have a snake in their head, but if they lose this it's going to be a bitch to get a replacement.

Saturday. They're back in Seattle by noon, and he's got Griffith moved into an entry-level condo at the corporate Hotel California by dinnertime. He leaves Griffith with a list of all the places in the area that deliver, tells him to come over for dinner tomorrow night. Walks off and leaves the kid to his own devices. Makes him nervous to do it. Kid's not used to living a lie 24/7, and one little slip, one little fuckup, and this is all toast.

Still. He has to trust that the kid's not going to fuck up.

He leaves Griffith's apartment and runs the stairs up to the penthouse (forgot his run this morning; shit, *shit*, that's breaking pattern, and sure, he could explain it away as the exigencies of travel, but it's better to keep from *making* the slips than to find a way to explain them). Knocks. Shoves his hands into his pocket and waits for the answer. When it doesn't come, he knocks again.

A minute later, the snake yanks open the door, looking irritated. It's wearing a pair of olive-green cargo pants and a light green t-shirt that says "Think Globally (Act Within Local Variable Scope)". He can't tell which one it is.

"Sorry to interrupt," he says, putting a little more slouch into his spine than he usually bothers with, just to add that super special touch of insouciance. "Thought you'd like an update."

The irritation transforms, just a little, into curiosity. It holds the door open for him. "Yes, of course," it says. "Come in."

There are three others of them sitting in the living room. (*Came home and found a lion in my living room* -- really, his brain can shut up *any fucking day now*.) Freaks him out. Not like he hasn't seen more than one of them at a time, but it still messes with his head. He doesn't know where to look. Mayfield's sitting in the living room, too, her long and luscious legs crossed at the knee. (He's tentatively pegged Mayfield as a snake, but he hasn't decided if it's another clone of Ba'al or if she's her own woman. Either way, no Tithonus she.)

"Didn't know you were having a party," he says. "I could have brought the beer."

Mayfield snorts, an indelicate and amused sound. "I was just leaving," she -- it -- says. Uncrosses its legs, rises. "I'll come back later."

The Ba'al who answered the door waves a hand at her. "Sit," it says. "Jack won't be staying long." It looks at Mayfield, hard and unyielding, and Mayfield's chin tips up, eyes narrowing. It sits back down. Cool and self-possessed and *oh*, there is something going on here that he can't identify and wishes he could, because if there's trouble in paradise he can probably use it somehow.

"Oh, all of you just cut it out," says another one of the Ba'als, one of the ones sitting on the couch. Just as touchy, just as irritated, but this one has a *hint* of familiarity in the set of its face, the wave of its hand; he tentatively pegs it as the Monster-for-his-Bridegroom. Has it confirmed when it adds, "Go on, JD. Pay no attention to the dragon in the corner."

Curiouser and curiouser, cried Alice, but now's not the time. He rocks on his heels, puts thoughts of intrigue out of his head. (Worst case scenario, he can ask the snake later, and isn't *that* a charming thought.) "Got Griffith settled. Nothing suspicious while we were out. I've got him down on the third floor. Came up to say we were back, and thank you for giving me access to the snooping software. It'll make keeping an eye on him a hell of a lot easier."

"That was the point," says the other Ba'al on the couch: scornful, dismissive. "If you need anything else from Security, call down and ask for Richard. He's been given instructions to help you."

He rocks on his heels again. That's a good sign. He's *pretty* sure Richard Schroeder is Ba'al's chief Jaffa on Earth; not *quite* First Prime, but close enough. "Yeah, thanks," he says. "Having the kid over for dinner tomorrow night. One of you should probably come

down and join us. If he's going to be helping me, he's going to have to get used to having the boss around."

He's greeted by a bridge of sighs and one lone acquiescence. Fortunately it's the one he needs to lure. "Yes, yes," his own personal elephant in the room says. "Fair enough. Feed me something worth my time."

He sketches a salute, loose and sloppy, two fingers flicking towards his forehead. (Present *arms*; the bolt, and the breech, and the cocking-piece, and the point of balance, which in our case we have not got; *arma virumque cano* and the Wrath of Peleus' Son, the direful *Spring* of all the Grecian Woes, o Goddess, *sing* and he *really* needs to get around to vacuuming out his brain one of these fucking days before he goes fucking *crazy*, down in the ground where the dead men go.) Mayfield's watching him. So are two out of four of the snakes.

"Downstairs if you need me," he says. "You kids have fun now."

His shoulderblades itch as he turns around and lets himself out.

\*

The next night, the snake shows up before Griffith does, strident in its best disguises, jeans and a t-shirt from a band he's only vaguely heard of and is pretty sure broke up in the 90s. For a minute, he's afraid it's Echo -- Echo is the one with the seemingly-endless wardrobe of t-shirts -- but the suspicion fades when it wanders in, throws itself on the couch, and puts its feet on the fucking table.

"Swear to fucking God I'm going to cut your fucking feet off one of these days," he says.

It smirks at him. "You're welcome to try," it says, merry and polite, but it takes its feet down. It gestures at his ear; takes him a second (it really is amazing how fucking fast he forgets the fucking thing), but he takes the earpiece out and tosses it on the counter.

"Yesterday seemed tense," he says. "No joy in Snakeville?"

The snake shrugs. "One goal for each, not twain among the dead unreconciled," it says, and he has to fucking *gape*, because did the fucker just fucking quote *Swinburne* at him? But it keeps going: "We're bickering again. It happens. Athena is an annoyance at best and an active distraction at worst, but the others find her useful. How goes your decision?"

He files the Goa'uld name away -- must mean Mayfield, which means there's more than one snake-*qua*-snake around, instead of just clones of Ba'al; he recognizes the mythological figure, of course, and the thought of Ba'al and Athena in the same sentence just makes his *head hurt*. Daniel keeps talking about doing a comprehensive mythological census of the Goa'uld and Earth's legends to see if he can find any rhyme or reason for the connections and never had the time. (Then again, Daniel's also threatened to go back to the Hebrew Bible and pull out all evidence of Goa'uld presence and technology, and only stopped when several people pointed out to him what a spectacularly *bad* idea that would be.)

"Still thinking," he says. "Don't rush it."

The snake sighs. "We don't have forever, you know. I've given you time. This *is* the sort of thing that's best not left too long. You've earned your reputation for being useful, but your usefulness may not last forever when circumstances change."

He stares at the snake, suspicion dawning. "You got someone into Homeworld, didn't you."

The snake smirks a little, the corners of its lips tipping up. "I'll trade you mine if you trade me yours. Your Captain Griffith's not on dismissal after all, is he? And yet he's never come near the SGC; we've checked. What strings did you pull there, and how did you manage to pull them? Or was it pre-arranged?"

He'd been expecting the snake to figure out *something*, which is why he doesn't flip the fuck out. But it's still a challenge to keep his voice even, his hands from shaking. He heads into the kitchen as a cover, opens the fridge, pulls out two beers. "I've mastered practical telepathy," he says, his voice bone-dry. "Awfully useful for sending messages."

The snake actually laughs. "No, I hadn't thought you *would* share your secrets."

"Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain," he says. He pops the caps off the beer bottles against the counter, brings one over to the snake. It takes it from him, delicately, evenly; their fingers don't even touch.

"To answer your question," the snake says, after it drains a good quarter of the bottle in a single sip, "no, we don't. Not yet. But my cohorts are working to suborn a particular individual in General O'Neill's office. I shall hold the information about *whom* until after we reach an agreement. Call it my bargaining chip."

Could be the snake's lying through its teeth. Could be the snake's telling the truth, and O'Neill's already figured out who's getting the court direct. Could be the snake's telling the truth, and O'Neill has no fucking clue. No way to tell. "You're asking a lot of me, you know," he says.

Up goes one eyebrow. "And you are asking considerably much of me in return. We've been over this. Have you brought your Captain Griffith in with you to provide you guidance? Or simply as a lifeline? It *would* be tragic if anything happened to him --"

The bottle leaves his hand before he's even conscious of throwing it; it trails beer as it flies, a perfect parabolic arc across the space between them, heading straight for the snake's head. Snake catches it, of course. The last half-inch of liquid in the bottle sloshes as the snake holds it up.

"You don't threaten him," he says, fighting to keep his voice taut, his spine straight. "You threaten me as much as you like, but you don't threaten him."

The snake smiles, soft and satisfied, and raises the near-empty bottle in salute before finishing off the last of the beer that remains inside it. "Duly noted," it says, and he stands there thinking that he's just handed the snake a fucking engraved invitation, invited it down like the wolf on the fold and pointed it to his soft and tender underbelly. *Fuck*.

He's starting to crack. He can *feel* himself starting to crack. Five months under and he let himself start thinking about the endgame and this is the way the fucking world ends; not with a bang, but a beer bottle.

He's saved from having to think of anything to respond with by the knock on the door, and it's even odds that it's Griffith or the food delivery, and he doesn't know which he hopes for. He doesn't let himself hesitate before stalking over and opening it. Griffith it is. To the kid's credit, he seems to pick up on the tension. Or maybe he just picks up on the fact that there's a lake of fucking beer seeping into the cracks in the hardwood floor.

"This isn't a bad time, is it?" Griffith asks, his eyes darting back and forth. "I can come back."

"No," he says, and takes a step back. "Come on in. I was just going to get a towel to clean up that spill."

The snake stands up. "I'll do it," it says. "My own fault. For being so clumsy."

It's not talking about its reflexes.

\*

Snake says his apartment still isn't under surveillance, even if Griffith's still on the Wheeling list. Stupid to accept it as truth, even if it is possible. Can't be helped; he has to get Griffith's opinion *somehow*.

So he waits until they've finished dinner (sushi; Imo's doesn't deliver, but the concierge was all-too-eager to run out and fetch; he's not sure if it's because dinner was for the boss or if it's because the concierge likes him for being generally undemanding) and the snake's excused itself for the night. Or at least for the moment. It promises it'll be back later, and he can see Griffith's eyes rounding a little at the implications -- the snake went out of its way to sound salacious -- and he winces. Yeah, *that's* going to go over well.

The only way he has to communicate with Griffith right under the snake's surveillance -- if they *are* under the snake's surveillance -- is going to go over even better. He wanders over to the couch, takes the beer (untouched; he hadn't even needed to tell Griffith to avoid alcohol for the duration) out of Griffith's hand, sets it on the coffee table. Griffith is just looking up at him with eyebrows drawn together when he straddles Griffith's lap and leans in close like he's nuzzling Griffith's ear.

He gets one shocked instant of Griffith thinking *what the fucking fuck* as clear as day before he can hiss "play along" in Griffith's ear, his lips against the shell of Griffith's earlobe, soft enough that even Griffith can barely hear. There's an instant more of shock and pause, and then Griffith's hands come up to his back, awkward, clutching. "That's the one," he says.

Tiny inaudible snort from Griffith, running through his shoulders; Griffith turns his head, buries his nose in the hair that's tickling it. He suppresses the shiver. Not his fault. Griffith's skin smells familiar, all too familiar, and smell is the sense that cuts deepest, the most unkindest cut of all. "Figured," Griffith breathes. "You're fucking crazy."

Yeah, thanks, that's fucking useful. He ignores the feel of Griffith's hands on his back. It's cover. Nothing more. "Crazy enough to frag the op?"

"Fuck, I don't even know," Griffith says, soft and uncertain. "Don't put this on me."

He makes himself breathe, steady, even. (Bad plan. Griffith's skin smells right, but he's pulling away even as he's leaning in, subtle small shifts of muscle and tendon, and with his eyes closed -- and when *had* he closed his fucking eyes, anyway? -- it feels like rejection and renunciation and he knows, *knows*, that his subconscious is going to be throwing *that* one at him for days. Weeks. For-fucking-ever.) He won't be upset. Won't *let* himself be upset. This is a shitload of a lot to drop in Griffith's lap and Griffith doesn't have the experience to be able to face this shit unflinching. This is all coming fast-and-furious and it's not exactly fair to expect Griffith to be able to make a call after two hours of interaction with the snake when *he* hasn't been able to make the call in coming up on the second fucking month.

Doesn't stop him from fisting his fingers against the fabric of the couch, resting his head over Griffith's shoulder for half a second before he takes another deep breath (stupid, *stupid*, Griffith smells too goddamn familiar, the faintest and softest of reminders, soap and sweat and *he will not think about what Griffith's skin reminds him of*) and puts his lips back where they were. "Couple of days," he says. "Nothing more. We have to move fast."

Griffith's fingers tense against his back, and for a second, he thinks Griffith might be half a second away from shoving him away, leaving him sprawling out on the floor. "Shit, I *know*," Griffith hisses in his ear. "Gimme -- Couple of days. A week, tops. I don't know enough yet."

He knows Griffith knows what's at stake. He's described both plans, in exhaustive detail, thirty-five thousand feet up and nobody listening in. Option one: say yes to the snake, let it line up all the ducks in a row, knock them down boom and get the hell out of Dodge. Option two: stall the snake for as long as they can, try to figure out where all the other snakes are, come up with *some* plan to get them all in the same place, roll up the score and anchors aweigh and pray like fuck they didn't miss any. Only two options. It's how he knows he's past the point where returning were as tedious as go o'er, because all of the branching possibilities are falling away, one option after another shot down like cans at the county fair.

Yes or no, go or no-go: binary choices, everything tailspinning down to a single coinflip, and he has to move fast, because the snake knows too fucking much and the longer he delays an answer, the closer it comes to looking like a choice. If he says yes, the snake will believe him, because he won't say yes if it's a lie, fucking snake *knows* that much, and so if the answer's no he won't, wouldn't *say* no, just draw it out for as long as possible, as long as he thinks he can. The longer he delays, the more likely the snake will believe his answer's no, even if he hasn't made the choice at all.

He'd feel better about that prospect if he'd had *any success at all* in figuring out just how many Ba'al-clones there *are* out there. (He'd been hoping Griffith would come bearing intel, hoping that O'Neill had worked his magic, hoping the SGC hadn't been *sitting around with their thumbs up their asses* while he's been stuck out here on the other side of the wall -- but no, that's not fair; Griffith says they've been after intel in the Galaxy At Large while he's been after intel *here*, and it's not their fault Ba'al is apparently capable of *outwitting the best minds on this planet*. Which, you know, *so not* helping him with his decision.)

So he's sympathetic to Griffith's little attack of nerves. (Grateful beyond the telling that Griffith's first response to hearing the problem set before him wasn't to kick it up the chain of command, the way so many people's responses would be, because this is the kind of thing that can't be solved in offices halfway across the country by men who don't know or don't remember what it's like getting their hands dirty. No matter what shit might rain down after.) But they don't have a lot of time to indulge it.

"Tops," he says, scant faint confirmation whispered in Griffith's ear. "Think fast, for God's sake. Now push me away."

Griffith sounds blank; the hands on his back still. "What?"

He puts his hands on Griffith's shoulders (warm, strong, and God, he can't, he can't fucking *do this* for much longer, but he has to and there's no way around it) and squeezes. "Push me away," he orders, putting command in his tone even though his voice is barely audible. "Make a scene. In case we're still on Candid Camera."

Another half-second of processing time (and yeah, he's sympathetic, but for fuck's sake, the kid has to start bringing his A-game any fucking time now), and then Griffith shoves.

He goes sprawling backward, off Griffith's lap, onto the floor. Doesn't crack his head on the coffeetable, but only because he was expecting it. "What the *fuck*?" he demands, his voice at normal volume again.

Griffith's eyes flick a quick apology, there-and-gone so fast that if he weren't looking for it, he wouldn't have seen it. "I'm not you," Griffith says. "I don't believe in fucking the boss."

It's a nice rebound. A damn nice rebound. Hurts like fucking hell, of course. His own fucking fault for telling the kid to make a scene.

\*

Monday dawns bright and early. Out the door at 0530 today; up to First, up Denny, and he zigzags back-and-forth along the streets down the length of the freeway all the way on back. Today his brain is singing nursery rhymes at him as he runs, hitch-skip-thump just rhythmic enough to lull his mind into thought and just annoying enough to keep him from getting any useful thought *accomplished*. It's the meditative equivalent of the Song That Never Ends, and about as welcome, because every time he thinks he's getting somewhere there's another verse of something kicking him out of gear. *All around the mulberry bush, the monkey chased the weasel; the monkey thought it was all in fun; pop goes the weasel.*

He doesn't like koans any more than he did when it was Oma-fucking-Desala spewing them, even though some of that might be negative association -- if you immediately know the candlelight is fire, your life is already burning down around your ears -- but running is for reasoning and meditation all at once, putting everything out from alpha to omega and working it all through. What bubbles up from the depths of his consciousness today aren't logical propositions, though, but nothing more than scraps and fragments, bits and pieces. Self-referential identities. Things he remembers, things he's always thought he'd forgotten.

Bobby Shafto's gone to sea, silver buckles on his knee; he'll come back and marry me, bonny Bobby Shafto. And Jack O'Neill never went to sea, but space is the new ocean, the final frontier (*O grant thy mercy and thy grace--*) and yeah, Jack came back (the very next day, thought he was a goner) but it changed him. Them. O brave new world that hath such people in it (let's start at once; there's a hell of a world next door) and he, they, changed utterly, and their terrible beauty and magnificent desolation have led them here-and-now and it's time to hearken unto the statutes and unto the judgments and save the fucking world again.

There have been times in his life where he's made the call, shuffled the cards, *iacta alea esto* and let the chips fall where they may, and some of those decisions have been trivial and some of them have been played for the highest stakes there are. (What's more important than your life and the fate of all you love? The fate of the world, the *galaxy*, and in the end he's always known that *dulce et decorum est pro caelo mori*, and if you're willing to die for something, you should be willing to live for it, too, pay the fiddler and call the tune, even if you're the one left without a chair when the music stops.) And his life as himself has been blessedly few of such disasters, but he's always known the day of reckoning was still on the table, because he's always been willing to use whatever weapon was at hand and that was true even when he was O'Neill.

He's been waiting for the day when O'Neill would call him back to the Great Game, knowing that someday his prince would come and his glass coffin would claim him, and so what if he put *himself* back in this time? Sooner or later all his roads would have led to downtown fucking Seattle, to the serpent and the apple and the pressure to fall off the tightrope he's walking, to let the walls crumble and the sun shine in. Inevitable, really. He's been falling since the day he was born-not-born, and the trick from here is to fall in a way that can win the game when he hasn't even figured out the rules.

Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor; rich man, poor man, beggarman, thief. He's been them all and he'll be again, and the question now is what he needs to be, how he needs to play this, what he can do to see it through. So he asks himself the golden questions, in the silence of his own mind, in the hallowed hollows of the spaces he's claimed as self: *What do you have? What do you need? What are your obligations? What is the optimal outcome?*

*Can you see any other way?*

Back to the lobby of the apartment building, not over to the office, and the Jury Convenes, Meeting Secretly Under Pretense. Griffith's standing in the lobby, talking with the concierge, deploying that charm like a tactical nuke (words are a weapon and always have been; every tool is a weapon if you hold it right). He saunters up, claims Griffith's attention. Good morning, campers; it's time for a healthy breakfast. Or something like that. Take Griffith for coffee (two bills this time, second number odd; O'Neill will know what he means, *all present and accounted for*) and will you go, lassie, go; we'll all go together, off to fill out the last of the HR paperwork and pick up Griffith's badge and go for the Cook's tour of the heights and nadirs of Snakeville. (We'll all go together when we go.)

Griffith's bright and bountiful this morning, up and down, back and forth, learning names and coaxing smiles and winning hearts wherever they go. He saves the Happy Hacker Haven for the last stop on the tour. "My old team," he says, presenting Griffith like a trophy all tied up in ribbons and bows. "If you need information, they're the ones to ask."

Suzukimo went into charm mode right back at Griffith the minute she saw him, and the only reason it's not a simper is because Suzukimo wouldn't know how to simper if you held her at gunpoint. "We'd be happy to help, really," she says, all sighs and smiles. "You can call me anytime."

He lets Griffith and Suzukimo make moon-eyes at each other while he sidles over to Virta's desk. (Virta's back to being team lead and intellectual director, gathering up the reins of all-and-sundry when he stepped away into mergers and acquisitions, and yeah, for all Virta's a *fucking snake*, he still misses working with the rest of these guys; moving him was actually one of the stupidest things the snake could have done, because it freed him up to look at the big picture instead of getting distracted by the problems to solve.) "Hey," he says, under cover of Griffith and Suzukimo rediscovering the birds and the bees. "How goes the B&E?"

Virta scowls. "Stalled," it says. "Don't suppose your minion has any insight."

"Haven't asked," he says. "Don't want him to think we aren't pure as the driven, even if he might be useful. I'll try to pick his brain casually. You need another pair of eyeballs on anything?"

"Maybe," Virta says. "Thought we were getting somewhere last week, but it dead-ended. About to settle in and try again this week. I'll call if I need anything."

This is the part that's giving him fits, because there's a flaw waiting to be discovered, now -- if Carter did her job, and he's confident that Carter did her job -- and he's *pretty* sure it's subtle enough that he's not going to be hanging the SGC out to dry before he's ready for the blowoff, but pretty sure isn't positive and if anyone can pick up on it, Virta can. If the snake manages to crack the eggshell before he's ready to direct the way it breaks, this could get messy.

Still, when you're down to black and white, yes or no, heads or tails, sometimes you have to cling at jackstraws, and once you're down to the tangle remaining you have to pick up your sticks with care, such care. Spend all your spare time lining up dominos, over and over again, so when you need to flick a finger and push them all down it looks effortless, and if something goes wrong, you've

got your plan B (and C, and D, all the way down to F which is for failure which is not a fucking option) already in place, and thinking on your feet isn't a luxury in this job, it's a *requirement*. He's doing his best to set up his attack-lines, string them out and hang them up, and if they don't look like an attack to anyone but him, well, he's the one calling the shots here.

(He's not thinking about what O'Neill's going to do with him when all is said and done. Once O'Neill figures out what his plan was. But that's for later, and he's never believed in anticipating Judgement Day before the last trumpet calls, and anyway, O'Neill did what he called for and that counts for something.)

So he tells Virta, "You know where I live when you need me," (and Virta smirks, and he ignores the frog-slime-squirm in his stomach) and then he raises his voice again. "C'mon, Griffith, flirt with the girl on your own time." And Griffith looks up, and Suzukimo dimples at them both -- no awkward miss, she -- and he takes Griffith over to his office and settles him down in the tiny cubbyhole outside, intended for a secretary. Drops a pile of paper on Griffith's desk and tells him to start combing through it for any opportunities that leap out. It's busywork; it's all right. It's not like either of them *mind* not accomplishing anything to further the snake's plans, and buried in the depth of all the busywork is as much hard evidence about the snake's plans and who in the company is aware of those plans as he can afford to give, because if something goes wrong and he can't get himself out of this, it's good to have another person who's capable of testifying if needs must.

He spends his day on the phone with Yao-the-CFO, who's just down the hall but both of them fucking hate running numbers in person, playing three-card monte with a shitload of corporate money. (And, side bonus, running down the stock prices of a few small ventures he's got on his acquisition list; he's hoping he won't be here long enough to put the plans into place, but if everything goes south and he has to keep playing the role for a while, it's good to know what your next move will be.) When quitting time rolls around, Griffith's got the first-order sort completed, a merry dragnet seining through a stack of information taller than Griffith's head to pull out the things that might pan out into something down the road. Griffith's taking this seriously; there's some good work in there. (Hell, when all this is over, he might spread some money around in the way he thinks the cards will fall.)

"Nice job," he says, seriously, and Griffith doesn't smile, just nods, but he can tell Griffith's glad for the praise anyway. "You mind being the research monkey for a while?"

"Do I have a choice?" Griffith asks, but he does smile then, making it a joke. (If the snake's listening, it'll hear precisely what they want it to hear: the angry young man with his working-class ties and his radical plans, starting to realize he's playing with the big boys and liking the opportunities he's seeing.) "Yeah, drop what you need me to go through on my desk. I like finding patterns in stuff."

"Sounds good," he says, leaning back in his chair and putting his feet up on his desk. "You about ready to get out of here? I'll buy you dinner to celebrate your first day."

Griffith blushes a little, just a faint coloration over the cheeks, and he watches, fascinated, because if Griffith can do that on command it's damn impressive but if Griffith's actually blushing it's just fucking funny. "Actually, I've got plans," Griffith says. "Hiroko and I are going out for dinner and drinks."

It takes him a second to realize who the fuck Griffith's talking about; he's not sure he ever *knew* Suzukimo's first name. He can't say *don't fuck around with the bad guys while you're on the fucking clock, you idiot*, so instead he says, "Gotta be careful with an office romance."

"Yes, Dad," Griffith says, dry as paper, and it makes him snort to hear. (Griffith knows scraps of the true story of what was, bits and pieces, here and there; knows the what but not the who, knows he's older than he seems but doesn't know *how* much older, didn't realize when he met the man that provided all the DNA and most of the memories that make the measure of the man who's here-and-now. At least, Griffith's never shown any signs of knowing. Griffith's met O'Neill, and Griffith's smart but more than that, smart and *intuitive*, and he doesn't want to think about how much it's going to suck if Griffith adds up two and two.) "I promise to have the keys to the car back by midnight."

He waves a hand. *Message received*; Griffith's saying *just heading out to get the lay of the land* as clear as day, spreading some of that Southern charm around to anybody who's willing to buy the pig in a poke Griffith's selling, and yeah, okay, that's part of what he brought Griffith here for, fair enough. "Have fun, then," he says. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Griffith smirks. "As far as I can tell, that doesn't rule out much."

He doesn't let it irritate him, doesn't ask himself if it's all part of the role Griffith's playing or if Griffith really does think that little of him. He doesn't care what Griffith thinks of him personally. All he cares about is whether or not Griffith's here to do the job.

\*

That night he goes back to his apartment, sets up his laptop so he can watch Griffith's Lojack broadcast. Doesn't listen in on the kid's date; give him some illusion of privacy, especially since the boys downstairs in the surveillance room no doubt have their ears on.

The snakes -- each and every one of them -- leave him alone. All night. It should make him feel like he's gotten a night off from having to play-the-man-Master-Ridley, but it only winds up leaving him waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Eventually, he stops waiting for the snake to come calling and packs it in for the night. When he checks the laptop before he heads in to stare unblinking at the ceiling, waiting for what dreams may come, Griffith's GPS coords have him over on Mercer Island. Residential neighborhood. Hey. Good for the fucking kid. At least one of them's got something warm and human to cuddle up to.

\*

Downtown Seattle.

He's partway into his morning run when it all comes crashing in on him. Fuck. Not now. Not *now*. Five months isn't long enough for him to be ready to snap like this, but apparently he Just Can't Manage Snakes' Unceasing Pressure, because without any particular warning he's slamming face-first into the wall of *what the fucking fuck do I think I'm doing here*.

*Fuck.*

Hazard of the fucking job, and used to be he'd have a control officer, someone he could make his way to and just *be himself* for a little bit, unwind all the layers of who he's pretending to be and all the stresses of having something this fucking huge riding on his shoulders. Doesn't have one here. Still can't let the pretense crack; he has to assume he's still being watched (the eye in the sky, the maker of rules) and can't call for help. (Is there anybody in there, just nod if you can hear me, is there anybody home?) He'd been hoping Griffith would be an outlet. Someone who knew the score. Someone who could remind him who he fucking is. It's not helping.



The reflection of himself in Griffith's eyes is small and squalid, and all he fucking wants to do is *go the fuck home*.

Can't be helped. Get a fucking grip. There's a time and there's a place and this is neither time nor place and he can *fucking have his fucking nervous breakdown once this is all over*. Which is not yet, and if he doesn't get a fucking grip it never will be.

(He knows what this is. A unit that's kept at peak readiness without ever seeing combat will disintegrate under the strain of always-jam-tomorrow, never-jam-today, and if you add in lack of sleep, poor nutrition -- he *still* keeps fucking forgetting to eat unless someone reminds him -- and the psychological stresses of staying undercover 24/7 without a break, his mind his only refuge, a breakdown is unavoidable. Knowing what causes it doesn't make it any easier to deal with. It never has.)

There's a certain sick inevitability to all of this. Once upon a time, which is always twice as long ago as you think it should be, Jack O'Neill's personal life had been a wreck upon the shores, every choice and every chance leading to disaster, but he'd always been able to get the fucking job done. He'd wondered (a long time ago, in a galaxy far far away) if personal life and professional life were a zero sum game, competence in one leading to failure in the other. The SGC had started to prove his point for him. Him, Daniel, Carter, Teal'c; it wasn't that men and women with families, with lives, *failed* at the SGC so much as those with other ties were never half as willing as they needed to be to throw it all to the wind on a single roll of the dice. And he spent seven years under that Elf Hill, sacrificing himself upon the shoals of necessity every fucking time he needed to, and at the end he'd come back a stranger (to himself, to others) and he'd had to, gotten to, start over.

He'd thought it would be easy to dive back under those waters and recollect that life. Or no -- not easy. But possible. He hadn't counted on the fact that *he's* one of those people with ties and tethers now, and in making himself someone who could bear up under that weight, he's made himself someone who can crack under this one.

And seventy-five percent of the reason he hollered for Griffith was to have someone who knew who he was, someone who could stand there and reassure him there's someone on the other end of that line, and it was a *stupid fucking move*, because now he's not just about to let himself go under for the third time, he's about to drag Griffith with him. When he'd stepped over the Great Divide, he'd made a bunch of fucking promises to himself, and one of them was that he'd never again accept the burden and privilege of command, never again be the one to condemn eager-eyed young men and women to burn out and flame away on his word and his directive. There are things he's done and things he's done with, and the list of things he's done with includes being the last man standing while other people pay for his sins and his remembrance. He's not going to let Griffith be the next name on his own personal black granite wall.

Which means it's suck it up and soldier, soldier, stick my legs in plaster tell me lies about Vietnam, get your ass in gear and *get a motherfucking grip*, because he will not let himself be someone else's ruin. Maybe that's the service Griffith can offer him. Maybe he let himself holler for backup not because he needed the pair of hands, but because he needed someone to value other than himself, because if he'd hit *this* particular tightrope-walk solo he might have let himself slide down and out with no one on belay and it's not the fall that kills you, it's the sudden *stop* at the end.

Get up. Get out.

Keep going.

Griffith's already sitting at the desk when he drags himself up the stairs, and he schools his face to impassivity as he passes by, because yeah, he's taken the time to pull himself up by the seat of his fucking *pants* but that doesn't mean he wants to have a fucking conversation. Still, Griffith didn't seem to get the memo. "Morning," the kid chirps, bright-and-fucking-cheery, and oh, God, he's starting to understand why Daniel always used to snarl at him before coffee.

(Coffee. *Fuck*. Forgot the fucking coffee, forgot the fucking message, what the fuck else is he forgetting to do? Missing one day of checkin isn't going to sink him, because the divers alarms don't get sounded until three days of radio silence without warning, but that's just fucking *sloppy* and fuck, he's cracking, he really is.)

"Morning," he snarls, and Griffith recoils at the tension in his voice, and fucking great, because the kid was already looking at him like he's motherfucking crazy and the last thing he needs right now is to make it even worse. He tries to modulate his tone, knows he only makes it half the way to 'sane'. "Sorry. Didn't get much sleep. Forgot to get my coffee, too."

Griffith frowns. "Go, sit down. I'll get you a cup. How do you take it?"

He can feel his hands clenching into fists at his sides. Pretty sure Griffith can see it, too. His first impulse is to snarl that he doesn't need tending, but that's reaction, not action, and it wouldn't be fucking fair. He's dragged Griffith into this thanks to his own fucking weaknesses, and he's not going to pile vilification on top of necessity, because he hasn't fallen that far. (Yet.)

So he makes himself smile, and he knows Griffith will see it for the lie that it is, but it can't be fucking helped. "You don't have to do that. I'll get it. Got time before I have to be on the phone with New York. Thanks, though."

Griffith gives him one of Those Looks, the one that goes straight through all his lies and his disguises and penetrates down to the bedrock they lie upon. (And oh my stars and garters it's like they learn that look in the womb, because the number of times Mitchell's given him a look identical to that one is legion and yeah, okay, we're crucifying ourselves this morning, drive another nail in while we're fucking at it; he still can't afford to think about Mitchell, his keystone and his linchpin and *now is not the fucking time*.) The look is equal parts refutation and realization, and Griffith's young and Griffith's untested and just like the skill to do comes from doing (and a round of applause to the Roman poet for *that little bon mot*), the skill to read comes from reading, and Griffith hasn't built as large a range of interpretation, the translating dictionary of gesture and expression.

But he's still pretty sure Griffith, for all his inexperience, knows people well enough to see that something's wrong even if the kid doesn't know *him* well enough to tell what that something is. And Griffith's frowning, tiny and unsatisfied, like reaching the end of the sentence and trailing off with a comma, waiting for the other clause to come.

Oh, God, he misses Mitchell and his wordless understanding *so fucking much* and he can't even let himself think the man's name, can't close his eyes and summon that impression, the sense-memory, the tactile ghost of Mitchell's touch --

"No," Griffith says, firm and unyielding, and it takes him a second for his ears to process the negation. "I said go and sit." He stands, pressing his hands against the desk, rising from the chair like Venus rising in a Botticelli sculpture and twice as fucking granite-hard. "You spoke up to take care of me, I can damn well take care of you."

Behind the cover story, behind the dress-up and make-believe and kabuki masks they've carved for themselves, it's a message. *I've got your back*. It should reassure him, and there's a part of him that is reassured by it, but there's a bigger part of him that learned long ago to hear *I've got your back* with the invisible antiphon at the end, *I've got your back and you'd fucking better have mine*, and right now what he needs is a fucking week on the fucking beach somewhere, or to climb inside his fucking head and rearrange the fucking scaffolding until it's going to hold, and he doesn't fucking have the fucking luxury of either.

He passes a hand over his face, scrubs at his eyes. "Yeah, okay," he says, because he might not want Griffith waiting on him hand and foot (too creepy) but right now the thought of possibly meeting another human being in the breakroom when he's just getting a cup of fucking *coffee* is a task akin to crossing the Rubicon and there's nothing to be done but turn around and close himself in his office and stare at his hands until they stop shaking.

The worst part is how there's nothing he can point to and say this, this is the one piece too much to carry, this is the straw that made the Black Camel kneel at Dhul-Hulaifah against the blessed stony ground. Nothing for him to rage against but rage itself, and he's been doing *that* for so long that he is tired, he is weary, he could sleep for a thousand years.

It's not raining outside today. If he could care he'd probably find the sunlight beautiful.

Griffith's back with the coffee lickety-split, and the kid turns off the smiles and the sunshine straight across the threshold. And when he lifts his head to watch the processional, he sees a message, loud and clear. One split second, there and gone. Griffith's striding across the room, bearing the coffee cups like a priest bears the reliquary, all slouch and sidle the way the kid's been presenting, representing, since he got here. Then, suddenly, Griffith's chin comes *up* and his shoulders go *back* and it's reporting for duty, sir, here I am, whatever you need. Blink and you miss it.

He doesn't blink.

He called Griffith here, his duty, his responsibility, and it doesn't matter why and it doesn't matter how. This whole fucking mess has been about doing the things he never wanted to do again, picking up the burdens he left long behind him, and the one burden he's always shouldered as years go by has been the burden of the men and women looking to him for a cue, for an order. And Captain Spencer Griffith is the latest in a long line of names and faces that starts out in nineteen-fucking-seventy-nine with David Martinez and Billy Cox and stretches out unbroken through to Samantha Carter, his last and greatest, always stronger than she thought she was. All the sons and the daughters of the patriot game he's shaped and he's molded, and he can't have a fucking nervous breakdown yet, he's got an officer to command.

It's a bitch to have a fucking conversation, here in the glass-bowl fish-lens that is this life, but Griffith is here and Griffith is counting on him and he *will not* let this fact amount to nothing. So he sits himself up (to take the cup Griffith's offering him, nothing more meaningful, nothing up my sleeve) and locks his eyes on Griffith's gaze and he dips his chin in thanks. Not thanks for the coffee at all. Back to back against the world, we merry few, we band of brothers, and Griffith hands him the cup and turns crisply around on one heel to go back to shoring up the snake's empire until they let it come crashing down.

Back to work. Clock's ticking. Old time is still a-flying. Pick your cliché, he can recite them all.

*Soon*, he promises himself. *Soon*.

Sooner or later he may even believe it.

\*

Delta comes to him that night, when the lights are down and the clock's gone midnight and he's sitting on a cushion facing the wall and trying to soothe his troubled mind. Drags him straight out of what little peace he's managed to build and casts him snarling right back into the world-that-is.

"I'm afraid I need an answer," it says.

No time to glean Griffith's thoughts. No time to weigh the snake's heart against a feather. No more time to stand poised on the razor's edge between contemplation and commitment, and he's always known (in his heart of hearts, in the places he goes when he can't avoid sleeping anymore) that no matter how many straws he grasped at, this would come down to his deal and his decision, and he closes his eyes and begs forgiveness of anything that might be listening in.

"Yes," he says.

The only thing that makes it bearable is that when he opens his eyes, the snake isn't smiling.

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june

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TOP SECRET//SAP (W)//BLUEBOOK//RESTRICTED//ORCON//25X4-HUMAN  
HANDLE VIA SCIF CHANNELS ONLY  
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TIRESIAS/CYLLENE

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6/19/08

for questioning regarding this operation, the role i played in it, and the outcome & details of the operation, if necessary. while i have attempted to provide a full & complete deconstruction of both how i spent my time on this operation and the complete costs incurred against myself, stargate command, the united states of america, and the planet earth, i recognize that it is impossible for a report to contain all the nuances and shades of an operation (particularly one so far-reaching), and i stand ready to clarify any last remaining details as necessary and upon request.

i duly swear, under penalty of perjury in a united states court of law, under 28 USC Â§ 1746 and article 131 of the uniform code of military justice, that the facts i have presented here are true and accurate to the best of my knowledge and my ability, with the exception of information noted to be too sensitive for inclusion in this report.

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There's someone in the bed with him. He can hear the breathing: soft, even, melodious. The sound of someone who belongs there, confident and self-assured.

It doesn't even bother him anymore.

\*

He wakes up on Saturday morning, and it's not until he's halfway through his shower that he realizes he's waiting for the other fucking shoe to drop.

The feeling persists as he brushes his teeth, forces himself to eat a bagel, and heads down to the building's gym for half an hour of weightlifting and self-recrimination. By the time he's done and running back up the stairs, back up to his apartment, he's resisting the urge to look over his shoulder every two seconds to see if there's someone bearing down behind him, coming to carry him away.

It isn't that he thinks the snake was trying to lure him into confessing (*quia peccavi nimis cogitatione verbo, et opere; mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa; forgive me, Father, for I have sinned; it has been twelve years since my last confession and about thirty years since I last meant it and I'm not sure what I'd do with absolution anyway, so why don't we just forget I ever said anything?*) so much as he thinks they might both be under the gun and under the wire. If the snake were just trying to get him to give himself away, he's done that already. Has been doing that, piece by piece, week after week, and he's pretty sure the snake would have had enough to justify removing him from the playing field a long damn time ago. But if they're both being played, if the rest of the Ba'als (*baalim*, yeah, he *knows* the fucking plural, Daniel made sure of that, and the last name Ba'al's adopted on Earth is just *very fucking funny* ha ha fucking ha) have suspected and are waiting for proof --

But nothing happens. (Or nothing happens *yet*.) He drinks a quart of Gatorade, is startled when it tastes fucking fantastic, drinks another. Laces up his running shoes. Runs down the stairs, knocks on Griffith's apartment door. Griffith answers, blinking sleepily, after several minutes' pause.

"Come on," he says. "Shoes on. We're going walksies."

"Fuck," Griffith groans. "What is this, basic?"

Underneath the mouth, though, Griffith's giving him the eagle eye: *you okay?* He answers back with a toss of his head, a twist of the lips: *as okay as I can be; get your ass in gear.* They don't say anything else as Griffith disappears into the bedroom, comes out in shorts and a plain grey "Beat Navy" t-shirt (and the sight of it makes his heart stop for half a second, because Mitchell owns one or two or a dozen of the fucking things and Griffith fills it out the way Mitchell probably used to, once upon a time). Griffith waves to the guy on the concierge desk as they go through the lobby. Probably knows the fucker's life story by now.

"Stretch," he orders, the minute they're out on the sidewalk. As Griffith obeys, he's watching the crowds around them, watching the ebb and flow of the Saturday-morning tourist trade, squinting against the sunbeam that peeks from behind a cloud. Griffith's not wearing his earpiece, not carrying his phone. No place to put it; the shorts have no pockets, and he woke Griffith up and dragged him out before Griffith could remember to put the earpiece in. It's all right. His phone, his earpiece, are both upstairs in his apartment too.

The snake called off his Jaffa escort weeks ago. He's still not sure *which* snake gave the order. Doesn't matter. He'll take it either way.

He rocks on his feet -- heel, toe, heel, toe, marching up and down again -- and tries to conceal his impatience as Griffith bends over, rubs his calves, stands up and goes through stretch and contortion and gyration. Bites back the exhortation to hurry the fuck up. Last thing he wants is Griffith *hors de combat*, or worse, to give the snake a reason to suggest a ride in the magical mystery box. He can wait five fucking minutes for Griffith to stretch out first.

When Griffith looks over and opens his mouth to say ready-steady-go, he sets the pace, bruising and brutal, before Griffith can get a word in edgewise. Only takes Griffith half a second to kick himself into gear, following along beside. It's not like running with the snake (perfectly paced, perfectly synchronized, always with the impression that the snake is holding itself back); Griffith's pushing himself flat-out, balls-to-the-wall, breathing rough and ragged and the occasional grunt when his heel comes down a bit too hard. Running with a human at his side is different than pacing a snake. Running with a human who hasn't been doing 10k a day for God only remembers how long is more than a little unfair.

(In another world, in another lifetime, it would be Mitchell here, at his side, day in, day out, setting the pace and nipping at his heels and laughing the whole way, *tag, you're it and what's the matter, old man, can't keep up?* and a whole host of friendly rivalry, teasing, taunting --)

Griffith doesn't object to the pace, for all that the kid's struggling. Tries his fucking best to keep up. (Here they come, zooming to meet our thunder -- oh God, if he gets that fucking song stuck in his head he's going to have to fucking kill something. Probably himself.) After about four miles, with Griffith gasping and sucking down air like they're going to stop making it any day now, the kid wheezes, "I fucking hate you."

He dials the pace back. Not a lot, just enough so that Griffith's not about to asphyxiate himself. "It's good for you," he says, cheerfully unsympathetic. "You can't run ten K without dying, Benton's been going damn easy on your ass."

He can feel Griffith jerk beside him -- Major Eli Benton, commander of SG-9 (Griffith's unit, and he knows damn well that it doesn't matter what's written down in Griffith's records about the past month, Griffith still considers himself part of Benton's team) has been with the SGC for a damn long time, and anyone doing even minimal research on the SGC -- which the snake has done -- would know the name. "I --" Griffith begins.

He takes pity on the kid. "Relax," he says. "You left your earpiece back at the roach motel. So did I. Snake pulled off the tail on *me* weeks back, I am the tail on you, and I'd spot anyone pacing us in a heartbeat. Not to mention that I take a different route every day, so they can't have a directional mike set up in advance, and the traffic's too fucking bad for them to have a car keep up with us. It's not perfect, but it's good enough for a little chat. Meant it about Benton going easy on your ass, though. You shouldn't be this out of shape."

"Diplomatic team," Griffith shoots back at him. "As in, *sitting on your ass and negotiating.*"

He snorts. "As in, sprinting back to the Gate with a bunch of pissed-off natives on your tail when you accidentally say the exact

wrong thing," he says. "Hasn't happened to you yet, you just haven't been there long enough. Give it time."

Griffith doesn't say anything, just gives him one of Those Looks again, and he catches himself before he accidentally outs himself to the kid in the name of busting his ass. He changes the subject. "How you holding up?"

"Aside from wanting to fall the fuck over right now?" Griffith says, then gets serious. "I'm holding. No fucking clue how you've managed this long."

It irritates him. Not that he doesn't want the kid to know how tough things are -- if Griffith thinks this is a Sunday stroll in the park, he's way more likely to fuck this up -- but this line of questioning is treading uncomfortably close to Griffith asking him *how* he's managed to hold up this long, and that's something he doesn't particularly feel like sharing. "My natural charm and talent," he snaps, and changes the subject. "Look. Had a visitor. Snake wanted an answer, yes or no. Couldn't stall any longer. We're committed."

Griffith nearly misses a step. Recovers neatly, no more than a hitch-in-stride, and he's gotta admire the kid's ability to keep moving when he's just gotten slapped in the face with particularly unwelcome news, but he doesn't like the way the kid glances over at him, once, twice, through lowered lashes like the only thing going through the kid's head is *what the fucking fuck*. Still, when Griffith speaks, he sounds like he's asking what fucking *time it is*. "Okay. What's the plan?"

Dammit, keeping his pace down to something that Griffith won't *die from* is like running half-hobbled. "You got a problem?" he snaps. Hearing himself overreacting. Can't stop himself from doing it.

Griffith's voice is quiet. "No sir," he says. "You brought me here to do a job. Your call what that job is."

He makes himself breathe. In through the nose. Out through the mouth. There's a part of him that wants to shake Griffith by the shoulders (don't you ever, kid, don't you ever dare take someone else's word for it, you *always* fucking think for yourself no matter *what* line of bullshit the officer in charge tries to feed you, because to do otherwise is to wake up one morning and discover you've been fucking *played*) and a part of him that wants to fucking clap Griffith on the back and say thank you, because he's going to need another pair of hands in all of this and he's not sure why the fuck Griffith trusts him but the course ahead is going to be rocky enough without having to worry about whether or not Griffith's on board.

"I can't give you these orders," he says. "Not morally, not ethically, not legally. This is the best plan I can come up with. But that doesn't mean it's going to go down smooth with the boys who call the shots. I can only protect you so far once it's all over. If you're not willing to take the risk, and I'm not going to lie to you about how much of a risk it is, you tell me now."

There's a flare of temper from the man beside him, and it's curious (he thinks, dispassionately) how he can read it in Griffith just as easily as he can read it in Mitchell, the storm clouds gathering and about to unleash, the force of Griffith's anger as palpable and tangible as the ground his feet are striking.

"I'm cutting you slack because you're going through a lot of shit," Griffith says, heavy and forceful. "But don't you fucking insult me by insinuating I can't hold up."

His blood is roaring in his ears, enough so that he can barely hear the belated "Sir" that Griffith tacks onto the end.

He stops running. Griffith stops too. Stupid, crazy, *suicidal* to stop here, to stop now, to give whoever might have realized by now that they've dropped off the grid a chance to catch up with them and *listen*, but it's either stop and re-center himself or *haul off and pop Griffith in the mouth*, and that wouldn't really go over well. "You stupid fucking idiot," he says, soft and vicious. "This isn't a game. This isn't a mission. This isn't a game of Capture the fucking Flag. I'm telling you that we're about to go in and get our hands dirty. Dirtier than you've ever gotten them before."

Griffith's looking back at him, still gasping for breath, eyes dark and tumultuous. "You don't know enough to say that."

"I know enough," he snaps. And yeah, pissing off the one person who's here to help him isn't a smart fucking idea, but this is real, this is *important*, he has to make the kid understand. (Wishes someone had given him this talk, back in the days when he'd still been cruising on hero worship and the desire to be a genuine hero his own goddamn self, back when all he'd needed was someone to tell him what to do --) "I know that I'm asking you to be a goddamn contract hitman on my fucking say-so, and you're not giving this anywhere near as much thought as you should by God be giving it."

The anger in Griffith's eyes is fading, replaced by what he's sickly sure is pity. Or maybe sympathy. He's not sure which one would be worse. "I know," Griffith says, and his voice is like a shutting door. "He briefed me before I came. I told you. You brought me here to do a job. I did my fucking thinking already. I might not know all of what you're up to, but you don't think I can see the big picture?" Griffith's chin comes up. "And besides. You're family."

For an instant he thinks Griffith's choice of pronoun is a clue, that Griffith's referring to O'Neill as *he* because Griffith *knows*, but his common sense catches up with his paranoia a second later. They're undercover. Even if he's using names, Griffith won't, not trusting himself not to slip at some later point when a slip would mean disaster. Then the rest of what Griffith said sinks in, and he almost has to bend over or sit down or *something*, because it's like a punch in the chest, like a knife to the stomach, like waking up and finding your whole world's crashed down around your ears while you were dreaming.

It must show on his face. It has to show, because Griffith takes a step forward and reaches for his shoulders to shore him up and keep him from pitching over, and he takes a step back before he even realizes he's doing it.

"Don't say that," he says, and his voice, that treacherous bastard (heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping) keeps speaking without him telling it what to say. "I can't let myself think that. Don't --"

Griffith's face changes again, understanding flashing for half a second before it's wiped clear and replaced with nothing more than calm. "Okay," he says. "We'll leave that part out. But I fucking know you, all right? I don't know who you used to be, and I don't know what you've seen and what you've done, but I know who you are now. If there were another way, you would have found it. If there were another choice, you would have taken it. You hate this and you're doing it anyway, and that tells me that there is no other way. I'm not going to say this again. I'm not going to get the *chance* to say this again. Whatever you fucking need me for. Whatever."

His eyes are stinging. It's the sweat rolling down his brow, his body's attempt to cool him in the early June heatwave, nothing more. He takes another step back, and a man pushing a baby stroller cuts between the space it makes between him and Griffith, and when the man is clear again, Griffith's not looking at him anymore.

"Come on," Griffith says. "Let's get moving again. You can tell me what to do."

\*

He spends Saturday afternoon in the office. Sitting in his office, the glass walls enclosing him tinted to opaque, headphones on his

ears and the music turned up loud. Writing line after line of code. The bitch is to make it just flawed *enough*. Ashes to ashes, we all fall down, but he's been falling for a long fucking time and by now there's nothing he doesn't know about how to make the fall look good.

The timing on all of this is so fucking critical. Sixteen different pieces that all have to happen, one-two-three, a place for everything and everything in its right place. Better to err on the side of too fucking subtle than to risk this cracking early. Doesn't want the show to start without him.

Letting the snake have a line in to the live system is the most insane part of a fucking insane plan. If this whole thing has been one long con trying to con the con-man, this is the point where he's handing the Snake Army the keys to the candy-store and telling them to help themselves. But nothing less would serve as justification for Delta summoning the troops, *all* the troops, and getting them all in the same room. Just the thought of it makes him want to put his fist through the panes of glass around him. (For want of the nail the shoe was lost, for want of intel the war was lost, and nations thrive and nations die, from Cynoscephalae to Bletchley Park and beyond, based on *what you know* and what you've failed to notice.)

Still. No other choice. There's no way Carter could have faked something reasonable, something with enough depth and enough breadth, to convince the snake that it was looking at live data. Not with the lead time he gave her. Carter's good but she's not that good, and she can't enlist an army of her own to help her generate gigabytes of fake reports and dummy email and the fucking cute cat pictures that every intranet spawns like salmon when users get left unattended for any length of time. Entropy's a bitch, and people left unattended with a computer and too much fucking free time (where that free time came from while they were all in the middle of *fighting for their fucking lives* six days a week he'll never know; these unanswerable questions and more, brought to you by --) are the greatest force of entropy ever fucking discovered, and Virta would spot a fake even if the rest of them wouldn't and none of his justifications make him feel any fucking better.

The sun's just setting across the Sound (objectively, he notices that the sunset is beautiful; it startles him when he realizes that he's still capable of noticing) when a knock comes on the door to his office. With the glass walls looking out on the hallway opaqued, he can't tell who it is, so he ignores it. (*Busy here. Saving the world, knock again later.*) A minute later, the door opens anyway. Fucking non-lockable doors.

It's Suzukimo. She's changed her hair, blue instead of purple, and he wonders, with the corner of his brain that isn't occupied in thinking of ways to get the fuck rid of her, whether it's got anything to do with Griffith preferring one over the other or if she just changes colors every now and then for shits and giggles.

He pushes the headphones off his ears, raises an eyebrow at her. "Saw you logged into the mainframe," she says, leaning a hip against the doorframe. "You running down anything interesting?"

"Little here, little there," he says, trying to convey *go away* with everything from tone of voice to tilt of head. "Sick and tired of dealing with men in suits. I wanted some hack time."

She laughs. "Fair enough. Hey, I was just about to go get something to eat. Come with me."

He *really* fucking doesn't want to, but as soon as she says 'eat' his stomach reminds him that he hasn't eaten anything since that bagel for breakfast, and he's pretty fucking sure the growl was loud enough for her to hear across the fucking office, because she raises an eyebrow and laughs again. No graceful way out.

So he locks his terminal and swivels his chair around. "Yeah, okay, fine. But we've gotta make it quick. I don't want to lose my train of thought."

No conversation on the way down -- she pops in her iPod earbuds the minute he hits the call-button for the elevator and doesn't even bother looking at him once, which just pisses him off, because why would she want company if she didn't want to fucking talk to him? When they get out on the street, though, she waves a hand and says, "Dragonfish okay? Bit of a hike, but if you don't mind --"

He tries to hide the sigh. "Yeah, that's fine," he says. "Lay on, MacDuff."

They walk up Seneca. When they pass Fifth, she makes a little frustrated noise. "Hang on," she says. "I wanna grab my hoodie from my car in case it gets colder now that the sun's down. You go ahead, I'll catch up." He rolls his eyes -- this is *not* how he particularly wanted to spend his evening -- but he does. And hey, speaking of ways he didn't want to spend his evening, a couple of minutes later as he's just turning over onto Sixth, Suzukimo says, in his ear, "There's a gun aimed at the base of your spine right now. Lift your left hand, slowly, and take the earpiece out of your ear. Drop it. Then keep walking."

Once upon a time, statements like that made his heart rate spike and his mouth go dry, no matter how fucking much experience he had. He can't quite say when it stopped, but he does remember, clear as bells, five years in, one delightful little afternoon in one delightful little jail cell halfway across the fucking universe when Daniel had frowned and said, "You know, I'm pretty sure I remember when getting shot at used to scare me." (Three weeks before Kelowna, and he'll never know if a little bit of fear would have saved Daniel in the end or if Daniel would have been Daniel even with his hands shaking and his heart aflutter.)

He lifts his left hand. Slowly. Unclips the earpiece and lets it fall to the ground, doing what the *crazy woman* wants him to do, because even if you're outgunned and outmaneuvered, as long as you're still standing, you've still got a chance to win. "Don't suppose we can talk about this, can we?" he says. "If you wanted me to buy you dinner, you could have just --"

"Shut up," she says. From the sound of her voice behind him, he can tell that she's stooped to pick up the earpiece, and for a second he debates turning, attacking -- but no, there are civilians on the street, even if nobody's stopped to look, and he will *not* fucking endanger them. He has to hope she won't either. "Into the park. I can shoot you faster than you can pull anything. Don't try."

He keeps walking. Slowly. Carefully. One foot in front of the other. Something nagging at the back of his mind. World's narrowed down. Click-click, single frame, Polaroid and Kodachrome (everything looks better in black and white). Park's a maze. Slabs of concrete, corpses of trees. Roar of the freeway and of artificial waterfalls and water-fountains to cover up any stray noise. Couldn't have asked for a better place to kill someone.

"I get to know why I'm dying?" he asks. Even though, hey, he's not planning on being the one who isn't walking out of this. (Get ready. Get solid. *Breathe.*)

"I am sorry," she says, and the bitch of it is, she sounds like she actually is. "But I can't let you crack that system for him."

He turns around. (*Slowly.*) She's got her right hand in the pocket of her hoodie, and yeah, that really *is* a pistol in her pocket; she's not just happy to see him. Should have fucking *realized* something was wrong when she mentioned wanting a fucking hoodie in the middle of a fucking heat wave, but it hadn't fucking *clicked* and his own fucking stupidity means he's going to have to --

Something goes *click*.

"What agency?" he says.

She'd readjusted her aim when he turned. Even through the hoodie he can tell she's got the shot; won't kill him, not instantly, not if he can move fast enough, but it'd put him in a world of hurt and he doesn't particularly relish the thought of waking up in the snake's magic box. But she doesn't pull the trigger. Instead she frowns. "What?"

Oh, for fuck's fucking sake. *God fucking deliver me from goddamn fucking amateurs*. "What agency?" he repeats, a little more snappish, a little more *fucking irritated*. "NID? NSA? I know you're not SGC."

The frown gets deeper. "How do you --"

He wants to close his eyes for patience, but he doesn't dare. Doesn't dare look at the expression on her face with anything other than his peripheral vision, either; he's watching the center of her chest, the curve of her shoulder, because he's never fucking once met an agent who could avoid telegraphing a shot in advance by bracing for the recoil. (If she'd been smart, she wouldn't have let him turn around. He can disarm her now. Or at least make sure they're both equally hurting.) "And who the *fuck* thought it was a good idea to send someone so fucking *young*? I know you've been here for like a year and a half. I read your fucking file."

Her shoulders ease in her confusion, and that's it, that's the signal he was waiting for. He could take her now; she's relaxed her guard enough. Feint right, lunge left. (Nearly everyone instinctively dodges right; people are primed to expect it.) Get around her, arm around her neck, chokehold and slide his hand into her pocket for the pistol. (Small enough that it's probably a .22; bulky enough that it's got to have a silencer.) From there, his weight will *probably* win it. He's fought with her enough, in their afternoon team bonding expeditions -- ha ha fucking ha -- that he can probably predict her. All it would take would be one quick motion.

He doesn't. Instead, he waits, because everyone deserves a fucking chance, even fucking interfering idiots who nearly give him a fucking *heart attack*, and sure enough, she demands, "Who the fuck *are* you?"

"Yeah, you see," he says. "There's a reason I know where you're *not* from. What *agency*, woman?"

She's got ten seconds to answer him before he goes for her anyway, and he's on four counting backwards before she shakes herself and says, "I'm with the IOA. Nobody fucking *told me* they were sending somebody else under."

"Yeah, well," he says. "Nobody fucking told me there was somebody under already, so I guess we're fucking even. Take your hand out of your pocket, sweetheart. You're making me nervous."

She does, and he breathes a little easier (not going out to die to-day, but hey, there's always to-morrow). "What's your mission?" she asks. "Intel, infiltration, or neutralization?"

Part of him wants to tell her she's a *fucking idiot* for letting down her guard -- news flash, honey, bad guys fucking *lie*, and even if he'd been the snake's most loyal minion he'd be singing the same song right about now -- but hey, her idiocy means he's not going to have to *kill her* today (probably), so he'll take it. "Six of one," he says. Canny, cagey. If she is what he thinks she is, he'll need to pick her brains, find out whether or not she can be useful. (And hey, fuck, if she is what he thinks she is, he could have had backup the *entire time he was here* and that thought makes him want to *shoot himself*.) If she's loyal to the snake, he hasn't said anything he can't explain (he knows she isn't SGC because he himself used to be; everything else could be a cunning lie). "What's yours?"

She heaves a disgusted sigh. "Long-term surveillance and trying to figure out how many people Ba'al has in the IOA. And *who*. We know he's got people, but I've only managed to finger half of them. I'm not on the books. I'll take it you aren't either."

"Oh, honey," he says. "You have no idea."

\*

She puts the fucking .22 back in her car. They go to fucking dinner. While they're there, he worms her real name out of her. Not Suzukimo Hiroko, but close enough, Suzuki Haruka, and yeah, okay, if you're building a long-term cover it's better to go for something you can train yourself to answer to quickly, but there's "train yourself to answer to quickly" and then there's "close enough to be a fucking liability" and a little *competence* is all he asks. (Give us this day our daily mask.)

Still, the fact she's lasted this long means something. Last guy O'Neill sent lasted a couple of weeks, and nobody will ever fucking know what it was that queered it. (Sick suspicion, opening the door and gesturing her through, not willing to let her get behind him: it might have been her. He doesn't know the guy O'Neill sent, not personally or by reputation, but if O'Neill's agent had been about to fuck something up, he has no trouble believing Suzuki might have played Delilah to save her own skin. *Fuck*.)

He puts his cellphone on the table in between the soup and the sushi (she gave him back his earpiece; he adds that, too) and excuses himself to the restroom. Grabs the busboy as he goes. Pays twenty bucks for the loan of his cell and ducks out the back door. God, this is fucking *sloppy* of him and he hates to have to do it, but he doesn't have a choice.

Dials the panic number. (One-time use, and he's blowing it, but his nerves are shot and his judgment's fucked and he has no fucking confidence in his ability to read what's what; Griffith likes her, and that counts for something, but they're *this fucking close* and he's not going to let something get in the way.) Lets the phone ring twice. Hangs up. Waits.

Two minutes later the phone vibrates in his hand. Caller ID's blocked. It's all right, he knows who it is. He flips the phone open and says, without preamble, "I've got like two minutes. Don't ask. Need you to run a name without tripping any tripwires."

O'Neill sounds tired. (Later there than it is here.) "Go," he says, nothing more.

He gives O'Neill Suzuki's name, the date of birth that was in her employment file with Farrow-Marshall. Which might be a fucking lie, but hey, who knows, it might cough up something. Hears the keys clicking. Anybody else would worry that O'Neill would fuck something up, give something away, but he of all people knows what O'Neill's capable of when the chips are on the table and if he tells O'Neill no tripwires, no tripwires it will be.

"Japanese national," O'Neill finally says. "Huh. That's interesting."

He realizes he's clenched his hand into a fist when he feels his fingernails biting his skin. Doesn't demand O'Neill explain what 'that' is, because if O'Neill doesn't explain himself in thirty seconds or less, he's going to reach straight through the phone and *kill the man where he stands*.

O'Neill clears his throat. "She's the step-grand-niece of the Japanese Minister of Defense. Dropped off the grid about two years ago. Looks like --" Click, click, click. "Japanese government's paying her, though. Through a double-blind intermediary, but it's there



if you dig. No other activity in the account for the past two years, but the checks are coming in regular."

Japan joined the IOA two years ago, O'Neill had told him. Mostly-silent member, doesn't bother even sending a delegate half the time, but they signed the treaty and they get the reports. (Eleven member nations and O'Neill's told him they can't even agree on where to have *lunch* much less what should be done with the greatest secret humanity's ever kept, and three can keep a secret if two of them are dead, and he wonders how many fucking *other* people have decided to send guests to the masque in the abbey.) "Thanks," he makes himself say. "That's what I needed. We're go for a week from Monday."

He hangs up before O'Neill can say anything else.

The sushi's on the table when he makes his way back. Suzuki looks up. "Long line for the men's room?" she asks, dryly.

"Yeah, stuff it," he says, tightly wound and weary. "Here's the deal. I'm not going to brief you. But I'm not going to let you fuck me, either. You've got two options. One, you do one thing for me, and I'll get you your list, turn it over free and clear. I won't tell you what that thing is for, or what the plan is, or what's going to go down; you're just going to have to trust me to do my job and do it right."

She taps a chopstick against the table. "I don't like the sound of that. What's two?"

He smiles, and he can see her recoil at the sight of it. "Two, we walk out of here like we're best fucking friends, I march you straight across town, into Balim's penthouse, and blow your cover sky-high."

He can see the fucking instant when she realizes that she let him talk her into putting the pistol back in the car. Let him talk her into sitting down to table with the hatchet buried. Her face goes taut and sickly, and he feels bad, a little, but not a whole fucking lot, because he is *so fucking close* and he is not going to let her blow it.

"Nothing stopping me from fighting you," she says, putting a brave face on it.

He smiles again, or at least shows her his teeth, and there's a part of him that knows you catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar but right now he doesn't fucking care. "I don't think you'd win," he says. "I'm having a *very bad year*."

She puts her chopsticks down and says, her voice full of venom, "I could do the same thing. Find evidence that you and Spence are sleeper agents and take you in to Balim myself."

And yeah. That must have been why she was cozying up with Griffith; Griffith's made no bones about his service background, and it must have piqued her interest. Just like he would have done, if he'd been under and someone with a suspicious history had turned up, and fuck this all, fuck all of it, he could have had *help* from moment fucking one and he hadn't, because nobody fucking *shares*. It's fucking Poland all fucking over again, never know who's an enemy and who's a friend, and he is not fucking going to let it end the same fucking way.

He leans over the table, makes his voice soft and deadly. "You could," he agrees. "But you'd be fucking yourself sideways if you did. Look, honey, you're good enough to have gotten this far, but I'm better. I've got advantages and benefits you can only fucking guess at, and I am about three moves away from winning this for everybody. I can give you everything you're here for wrapped up in ribbons and bows, if you stay the fuck out of my way and play along. If you've gotten this far, you're smart. If you want to get further, stay smart."

He waits a second to see how she's going to take it, because if she doesn't decide -- here and now -- to play along, she's not going to make it back to the office and he's going to have to figure out how he can do it and *not get fucking caught*. There's a minute of silence, where he thinks he might have to fight her after all, and then her mouth twists. "So I guess I'm taking option number one, then."

"Good choice," he says. "Here's what you're going to do."

\*

He's starting to feel like a fucking ringmaster (step right up, one week only, the amazing juggling man; step right up, it's only a dollar, the large print giveth and the small print taketh away). Once upon a time he was trained for this, moved men and munitions around like chess pieces, every detail of a theater a shining beacon in his head. This is harder. He doesn't know why.

He knocks on Griffith's door at midnight. A pause. He's just lifting his hand to knock again when he hears Griffith yell, muffled and sparse, "It's open. Come in."

Suspicious like fuck, and fuck it, this day has *actually* fucking made him fucking reconsider his decision to stay mostly unarmed while he's here. (Carrying a pistol just invites trouble from the cops, which is the last thing he needs; carrying a zat invites trouble from all sorts of other directions. He carries a clip-point knife, ankle-sheathed, its blade a quarter-inch less than Seattle's city-code definition of 'dangerous weapon', and he knows it's nothing more than a security blanket; he hadn't even thought to go for it when Suzuki threatened him, which tells him how fucking useful it wouldn't be in a showdown.) Split second to threat-assess, and he plasters himself against the side of the wall, not against the door itself, and reaches out a hand to turn the doorknob.

Feels kind of fucking stupid when he whips his head around the doorjamb to get a quick-flash sit rep, prepared to stop drop and roll if someone's got a pistol (*another* pistol) pointed at his head (or Griffith's), only to discover the reason Griffith didn't want to answer the door is just because Griffith's standing in the middle of the living room, two feet from the snake staring back at him. But hey. He'll take alive and feeling stupid over dead (temporary or permanent) any day; it's not paranoia if they really *are* out to get you and The Computer Is Your Friend, Friend Citizen and it's better to be a live jackal than a dead lion but it's better still to be a live lion and fuck this all, he really needs a fucking nap.

The air is charged, like they've been fighting, like Griffith wants nothing more than to get *away* but doesn't want to turn his back on anything that might go squirming when the rock is lifted or come crawling out of the dark the minute he takes his attention away. For a second he wonders if they're fucked, can't bring himself to care, even, and he knows that's probably a bad sign, until the snake turns its head and smiles, delighted to fucking see him, and there's only one of them that can smile like that.

He shuts the door behind him, lifts a hand to his ear, takes off the earpiece for the second time today and drops it on the hall table. Griffith's eyes are wide and wild (for he on honey-dew hath fed and drunk the milk of paradise), and he knows why (had forgotten until just now, had forgotten so fucking much), but they don't have time for Griffith to indulge it. "My invitation to the party got lost in the mail, I see," he says.

Griffith licks his lips. Rallies a little. "You only would have said you had to wash your hair."

He's proud of the kid. Excessive sarcasm under pressure is usually a skill that you don't pick up until your second or third year at

the SGC. If you survive that long.

Delta takes a step back, and he can see Griffith draw an easier breath. "I merely came by to confirm some last-minute details," it says. "I've taken the liberty of arranging for a convenient electrical problem with the surveillance in Mr. Griffith's apartment for the duration. They won't be able to get someone up to fix it until at least tomorrow."

"Yeah?" he asks. "You sure about that? If I were you people, I'd find a failure like that awfully convenient."

It laughs. "My dear JD, it's the best-kept secret among those in the know: the damn surveillance system in this building shorts out at least once a month. Something about the humidity. Technology designed for a climate-controlled ship does not fare well in a temperate rainforest." It looks back over at Griffith. "And with that, I believe I'll take my leave. Good evening, gentlemen."

Yeah, yeah, hurry up please it's time, goodnight, sweet ladies, goodnight goodnight, and Griffith's watching the snake as it swans out the door, and the minute the door closes behind it, Griffith's sinking down onto the Ikea-hideous couch. Hands shaking. "Fuck," he says, half benediction, half imprecation. "Fuck."

He crosses the room and is about to drop down on the couch next to Griffith when he realizes: the last thing Griffith probably wants right now is someone or something else in his fucking personal space. He beats a several-step retreat (doesn't miss the way Griffith's eyes go sick and thankful, just for a second) and lowers himself to the floor, arranging himself in *seiza* and looking Griffith over carefully.

"You okay?" he asks.

For a minute he thinks Griffith's going to say *no* -- is ready to tell Griffith to go stick his head under the tap in the kitchen and hope the cold water yanks him out of it -- but after a few breaths, Griffith passes one hand over his face, his hair. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah. Fuck." He breathes out again, shifting and exhausted-sounding. "Do you ever fucking get used to that?"

And yeah, okay, it's a fair question, but it's one he really doesn't want to think about, because the last thing he can afford right now is a fucking centipede's dilemma. Still, Griffith deserves an answer, an *honest* answer, not meaningless platitudes and lies. "No," he says. "But after a while, you stop noticing."

(You can try to prepare them, you can tell them what it's like, and there are, used to be, entire days of lectures in the SGC's General Training and Orientation curriculum about the reactions humans have, and none of them fucking help. You can put two, three, four humans in the room with a snake and they'll have even odds of being okay, but the first time you find yourself facing down a snake all alone, no backup, that slick and unctuous reptilian-fascination *charisma* focused nowhere in the world but on you and you alone, all that preparation flies straight out the fucking window. Hundreds of myths have arisen to explain why ophidiophobia is one of the deep fears; hundreds of studies have been done to find why it's one of the ones rooted in evolutionary biology; answers to these questions and more, coming to a channel near you as soon as the Program goes public and the whole world gets to Monday-morning quarterback.)

"Yeah," Griffith says, after another second. (*Yeah, okay, I think you're fucking crazy, but I'll take your word for it,* and he doesn't have the heart to tell the kid that we're all mad here.) Griffith's eyes dart over to the door the snake slithered out of, then back to him, and -- fuck, *fuck* -- he can see Griffith adding up the numbers, putting two and two together to make mauve or fucking *pineapple* or something else inside that brain. "You --"

It's Griffith realizing exactly what he's done, what he's been forced to do, and seeing it (finally) through the lens of perspective: he can see Griffith bringing that tremendous imagination to bear on the problem, conjuring the thought of being alone in a room, in a *bed*, with *that*, imagining what it must be like to have to *pretend* -- and he can't stand to hear it, can't bear to listen to it, can't let himself open the fucking box he's shoved it all into. "Don't," he says, hard and fast, before Griffith can get more than that single syllable out. An order, as firm and as binding (more so) than any order he's ever given.

Griffith shuts his mouth. He watches the evidence on Griffith's face, watches the contortions (realization, understanding, slowly-spreading horror) and tries not to let any of them reach him, touch him, because he is *fucking drowning* here and sympathy and pity aren't a lifeline, they're a fucking anchor that will drag him under. He pins Griffith with his eyes. "If you need a minute," he says, and he tries to remember how to keep his voice gentle, "take it."

He watches as Griffith gets it together, grabs for control. Proud of the kid. *He* didn't flip out the first time he came face to face with a snake, but only because he'd been too fucking stupid to know what he was facing, and after that, well, once you've nuked one of them, all the others lose a bit of their thrall. "No," Griffith says, looking down at his hands. "No. I'm okay. I'm okay. Did you --"

Stops mid-sentence, eyes flicking to the door, up to the light fixture, and hey, another reason to be proud of the kid, because he never told Griffith where the bugs were, which means the kid's smart enough to figure it out on his own. Good man. "Fuck it," he says. "If the snake's lying to us about the surveillance, we're fucked anyway, because if it's lying to us about that, it's lying to us about everything."

"Yeah, forgive me if I fail to find that comforting," Griffith says. He breathes out, long and edged. "Sorry. Anyway. You're later than I thought you'd be. Did you manage to get the code almost ready?"

"No, actually," he says. "I got sidetracked. By your girlfriend. With a .22."

The look Griffith gives him is entertaining, at least. The explanation only takes a few minutes. Griffith's about as happy with the situation as he is, which is to say, not at all, but at least having Suzuki be the one to crack the system, instead of him, adds another layer of misdirection. (Nothing up his sleeve.) She'll break in. They'll use her distraction. Once everything is rolling, she'll be the one to shut the door behind, release the worm that will destroy any hint of anything the snake has saved. The offsite backups only go once a week. If they time it right, and he'll fucking time it right, they'll be able to make sure the snake doesn't keep any long-term profit.

"What'd the snake want?" he finally asks. "Wasn't expecting to come back and find the two of you having a tea party."

Griffith had almost relaxed; the mention of the snake makes him tense up again. He watches as Griffith's hands flex. "I think he wanted to see if I was on board with the plan," Griffith says. "Check if I was planning on getting out of the way and letting you two work things out, or if I was going to cause problems."

It must have been a delightful little conversation. He has no trouble interpreting what the snake really meant. "Wanted to see if I'd brought you in deliberately, or if you being here is as much of a coincidence as it looks like," he says. He hasn't told the snake everything. Hasn't even told the snake anything, really, just that Griffith will back whatever he decides in the end. Snake must have been angling to find out whether or not he really does have a channel out.

Griffith nods. "Yeah," he says, and then seems to notice his fingernails biting into the fabric of his jeans, makes his fingers loosen but doesn't look up. "Look," he says, abruptly. "I have a question to ask, and you're not going to like it."

He closes his eyes. He doesn't like any of this, really; why should this be any different? "Go ahead," he says, his voice clipped.

When Griffith looks up, his face is taut, and he looks much older than he has any right to. "You don't really need me here," he says. "Not for any of the reasons you've said you did. And I'm not having second thoughts, and I'm with you until the end on this, but I need to know what the real reason was."

It's a good thing he's already in *seiza*; the position is familiar, soothing, comforting. If he'd been sitting next to Griffith, he might have decked the man; if he'd been standing and pacing, he might have put a fist through the fucking wall. The depth of his anger, the short stab of fury slicing through his pasted-on serenity, frightens him. It's not -- precisely -- that he resents having his motivations called into question, although that's part of it. He can't tell what the rest of the source of his anger is, and that tells him Griffith's stumbled on a tripwire and he's fucking going to have to fucking disarm it before they all get fucking fragged.

Griffith's watching him, and there's fear in Griffith's face, which means he's fucking forgotten to watch his fucking body language again, which means he's fucking slipping further than he fucking thought he was. He holds up a hand. "Wait," he says, and Griffith's chin dips, one-half of a nod, enough for him to be okay with closing his eyes and going spelunking solo.

*Breathe.*

He can feel Griffith's eyes on his face, and he fucking *hates* having to do this with an audience, has always hated giving anyone cause to think that he's weak enough to need to think things through so painstakingly before taking action or speaking further. It's why he has important conversations with Mitchell after the lights have gone down on Broadway, why he drags himself out to run himself stupid every time they're in the middle of a fight. And he's not thinking about Mitchell, he knows he's not supposed to be thinking about Mitchell, but he *is* and he has been and with Griffith here he can't *not* and it's fucking killing him, and if he'd been actually looking for someone to keep him from cracking the way he'd thought he had been, Griffith should have been the last fucking person on this planet -- the second last fucking person on this planet -- for him to call.

There's an answer in that.

He opens his eyes again. It's only been a couple of seconds; Griffith hasn't even had time to start fidgeting yet. Owes him the truth. Owes him an apology. Owes him a hell of a lot more, but right now, the truth is all he has to offer.

"Because you were the closest thing I could call to the only person who could make sure I stay human," he says, and -- fuck, *fuck* -- his fucking voice cracks halfway through and *he will not fucking break*.

And fucking hell, he sounds like some kind of bad melodrama, and he can only hope Griffith takes it as meaning that he's looking for someone to keep him unsnaked through all of this, but he can see in Griffith's face that Griffith's smart enough to hear what he really means. He keeps himself still. Makes himself look Griffith in the eye. Makes himself not flinch. When this is over, if this is over, he's going to have to live with knowing that Griffith has seen this, all these parts of himself that he hides away and never fucking wants to show, and it serves him fucking right.

"This isn't the first time you've done something like this, is it," Griffith says. Quietly. So quietly.

*Breathe.* "No," he says, matching quiet for quiet. "No, it's not. Said I wouldn't ever do it again. Doing a lot of things I said I'd never do again."

Griffith closes his eyes, a second longer than it would take for a blink. Opens them again. "Yeah," he says, and it's not agreement with what he just said, it's the answer to a question he hasn't even asked. "Yeah. Okay. I can see how much you hate this, so I'll make this quick. And you don't have to answer me, but I have to ask it anyway, because if that's my job here, I'm damn well going to do it." Griffith's braced for impact, loaded for bear, and that tells him just how bad it's going to be. "I'm sure you've asked yourself this a hundred times already, but I'm going to make it a hundred and one. Keeping everything safe is worth it. I know you'd agree. But are you sure this is the only way?"

Hearing it from outside his own head is like a bucket of ice water in his face, like a steel bar to the back of his skull. His own little nightmares, his own perpetual conscience whispering in his ear. He waits for the anger to follow, hard on the heels of the shock, and he's so braced for it that he almost doesn't realize it hasn't arrived.

There's an answer in that, too. If there's one thing he's learned -- if there's one thing he's still fucking managed to hang on to from all the things he'd learned, in all those months of striving to better himself, all those months dedicated to learning compassion and wisdom, learning that he could *have* compassion and wisdom -- it's that anger is almost always fear or shame in disguise. And he's come so far into this that he can't even be afraid anymore, and shame only happens when your hidden mind knows you're doing something wrong.

He's done so many things wrong, in all of this. Enough that he'll be picking up the pieces for months. Years. Enough that there are some pieces he won't ever be able to fit back together, and it's just going to be another item on the list of scars he's inflicted on the world around him. But he's confident of this.

So he looks Griffith in the eye, and he says, holding as steady as he still can, "Yeah. Yeah, I am."

It feels like a promise. Like a vow, even if he's the only one who knows he's taking it. And he realizes, hearing it, that *this* is what he needed, someone to ask that question without confrontation and without conflict, because he didn't know his answer was truth and not self-delusion until he gave it to someone outside his own head.

His words hang between them, in the silence, until Griffith finally nods. "Okay," Griffith says, and the simple *trust* in that single word is baffling. Griffith unfolds himself from the couch. Stands in a flutter of directed kinetic effort that's so smooth and graceful, so effortless, that it makes his heart hurt to see it, because it's what Mitchell should command and never will again. "Then I'm going to get some sleep. I'll be ready."

He breathes out, and they aren't the slow and controlled breaths of *shikantaza* anymore. Maybe haven't been for a while. He hasn't noticed. Still feels better than he has in a long damn fucking time, and it's temporary peace at best -- a respite won from having a weight he'd barely noticed taken off his shoulders -- but hey, he'll fucking take it.

"I'll be ready too," he says, and for the first time in a while he thinks he might mean it.

\*

Tuesday morning: another fine day in the Worker's Paradise. Timing on this bit's fairly critical. Monday had been calm and

peaceful, same old same old, until twenty minutes before end-of-day, when Suzuki had come through for him and walked into the snake's office with the news that they had liftoff.

Didn't get a lick of sleep -- the snake had pulled him into its office too, and they'd spent the entire night trawling through as much information as they could take in: him because he knew the information architecture (or as close to information architecture as a system that sprung up freeform over ten years can have), the snake because it knows what it's looking for. That bit was a deviation from plan, and he's hoping like hell that it's not a bad omen. Supposed to have been Delta in there with him, because Delta needs to be the one to beat the bushes and flush out the game, but Suzuki had picked *the* precise wrong time, the half-hour when Delta was downstairs dealing with the Jaffa and Echo had wandered up to warm the desk chair, and so it was three to the races and he'd spent the entire fucking night with his *skin crawling* from being so close to not one snake, but two.

Griffith's fault for reminding him, calling his attention to the primal twitch from the back of the hindbrain; he'd been doing all right with not letting himself notice it up until then. Still. Can't be helped. None of this can.

Cracking the SGC's system is worthy of an all-hands briefing, and that's what he needed Delta for: to push and prod and maneuver so that *all hands* means *all snakes*, the whole set and nothing but the snakes, keeping everyone away whose contributions to the whole enchilada have been nothing more than being a little bit greedy and a little bit weak. There isn't a snake in heaven or earth that understands the concept of avoiding collateral damage -- shooting off a cannon to kill a gnat is a hell of a lot more impressive when it's tearing down a solar system to deal with one annoyance -- but Delta had actually been the one to bring up the point when they'd been planning, and it had nagged at him until he'd realized why. Delta wants to keep its pet humans out of the line of fire, because it doesn't want to have to train up a new executive team.

Turns his fucking stomach. (Let it go. By now there isn't a fucking thing he doesn't know about the costs you have to bear up under.)

He'd been paroled as the sun started to rise, dismissed back to the Hotel California for an hour or two for a chance to shower, shit and shave. Echo never has seemed to give a fuck about whether or not he gets to sleep. If it had been just Delta (the way it was supposed to have been, and he *will not* think about that, because once you start adding up all the ways the fucking plan is crashing, you lose the ability to recompile on the fly) he would have been able to catch at least a few hours down, but it can't be helped. Once upon a time he could have caught forty winks no matter where, but today he's wired. Edgy. Old soldiers never die, but their habits fade away; sleep is food and food is sleep and he isn't getting either.

0600. Twelve hours left. Sixteen, tops. He can make it.

*Shikantaza* is out of the question, but he can settle himself down properly for twenty fucking minutes at least, arrange himself in *kekka fuza* and go over the plan a few more times. Daniel had asked him, once upon a time, how he could always have another option, waiting in reserve. Way back in the beginning, back when the world was young again and new. Before Daniel had learned to see all the hesitations, the false starts, the wheels spinning while he tried to figure out *what the fuck next*. He hadn't had the heart to tell Daniel about the part of himself always watching, waiting, calculating, planning. He'd been trying to preserve that sense of wonder, that sense of trust, that Daniel had brought to the table, and Daniel hadn't realized --

Enough. The past is another country (and long ago, and besides, the wench is dead). He's got worst-case scenarios to plan.

Delta has called the All-Clone Conference for 1400 (after the market closes in New York; can't fuck with business, after all). Here, instead of any one of Ba'al's other *pieds-à-terre* halfway across the galaxy, because they need to have the data at hand, need to be able to see the information they're discussing, and even Ba'al hasn't been able to figure out how to interface Goa'uld data crystals with USB or FireWire yet. All, because there isn't a single one of the snakes that would tolerate being left out of the fray; Delta's told him they're far from being a unified front, and the squabbling for pecking order is brutal. The regularly-scheduled executive team meeting is at 1600; it usually runs long. The honor of his presence has been requested in the Bat Cave down in the basement for most of the day, as he helps the snake -- snakes -- trawl through the wealth of data they've uncovered.

Not going to be a lot of time later to get away and prepare -- physically, mentally. Time to do the preparation now. He's got lists of all the things that are going to need to be cleaned up, and some of them are obvious and some of them are agonizing.

The snakes: that's obvious. He's known how he'll handle *that* for a while; the symbiote poison Griffith smuggled in will handle that problem nicely. The problem *there* had always been getting them all in the same place. Could aerosolize the poison into the HVAC system, and he'd thought about it, but he still doesn't know for sure who all the snakes *are*, and the last fucking thing they need is a rash of mysterious deaths throughout the building; medical emergencies lead to cops and paramedics and the medical examiner would be *be fucking fascinated* by what turned up on autopsy. The cleanup on that would take *months*, if they wanted to keep the program and all its associated fact quiet instead of coming clean, and he knows full well that O'Neill's been holding off full-disclosure with tooth and claw for years. O'Neill had ordered him, coming into this situation: *clean up the problem, but clean it up as quietly as you can*. There's no guarantee that any snake would die alone, and even in *this* company it's something to be concerned about when your next-door cubicle neighbor topples over and goes into seizures; the public-health panic would spread too fast for them to contain.

The Jaffa: obvious too, really; he knows Teal'c has been trying to lead his people to freedom for a long damn time by now and he knows there are plenty who haven't taken him up on it, like lab rats cowering in the back of the cage even after the door's been opened. But hell, he's got a hell of a fucking lot of sympathy for people who don't know how to take freedom when it's offered and instead dive back into the burning building because it's the only home they've ever known. The Jaffa can be someone else's problem; they aren't going to cause trouble here. He and Delta reached an agreement on that point.

But there's too much knowledge floating around in that building, and most of it is in the wrong hands.

All of this, so much of this, has been an exercise in figuring out what he can live with and where his absolute lines are, and this is one of those points he won't compromise on. He's negotiated a truce he can live with, and if the snake holds to it, it won't be happily-ever-after but at least it won't be game-over-insert-quarter-to-continue, either. He doesn't have any idea if the snake's going to hold to it, and that means he has to do what he can to cripple as many as possible of the ways by which the snake could start over again.

*I will not kill, but respect all life.* Yeah. So much for that one. Again.

Mayfield's a snake; she'll get caught up in the dragnet. He's quizzed Delta about the rest of the executive team. Bezian and Cocumã know the score; Roberts and Yao and Rickowski don't. But even Bezian and Cocumã have imperfect knowledge; they know about Ba'al and they know about the Goa'uld, but they don't know about the cloning. They'll take orders from Delta and never notice the change from command-by-committee to solo direction, and while they might have a bit of a problem with the change in company mandate, Delta assures him that they're suitably cowed by now. Enough not to cause trouble, at least.

There's one group of people he can't leave in the snake's hands, though, and that's the team of tame mad scientists downstairs in the basement, the snake's personal Manhattan Project building guns and butter both. Humans. All of them. Humans who know what

the snake is. Humans who know what the snake wants. Humans who've been building better mousetraps anyway. Snake doesn't *need* them -- it's capable of playing with the cool toys itself -- but there's no doubt they're useful. Snake can't be everywhere, after all. At least not without Xeroxing itself again.

And once upon a time, he'd been the kind of guy who took those types of people in and offered them a chance at rehabilitation. Still could. Almost. Maybe. But it's not just a weapons manufacturing lab down there; it's not just a technology research facility; it's not even just a biological weapons incubator. All of those, yes. But more. It's also where the snake does its cloning, and the O-chem boys have been playing along the whole time. And there's absolutely nobody he could turn them over to and be certain their information wouldn't get into the wrong hands at *some* point. Not even O'Neill. O'Neill -- for all his dedication to doing what's right -- has orders to follow. People to pull his strings.

*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* And yeah, he's read Plato -- news to Daniel, always was; he's half-convinced Daniel always thought you got to be a Colonel by keeping your uniform neat -- and he knows damn well that's the origin of the whole set of military programming and conditioning, all the things they drill into you early and often: *service*, not power. You do it because someone has to, and afterwards you wash the blood off your hands but never off your soul, and the chain of command is there because that way someone, somewhere, has thought of all the tough questions so you don't have to. There are no right orders and wrong orders, just lawful orders and unlawful orders, and if you have to get yourself through it by thinking that the guy all the way up the chain is good and noble and bright and idealistic -- well, you do what you have to do. He always has.

No chains of command, here. There's just him, deciding who lives and who dies and who knows too much for him to be willing to turn them over to the black-suit boys with their suspect loyalties. Because all it would take would be for one, just *one* fucking idiot to think, hey, surely a cloned symbiote wouldn't be as dangerous as the original, all it would take would be *one* fucking idiot tracking down one of the lab boys and offering wealth power fame, and they'd be right back where they motherfucking started.

He can't let that happen. Can't leave them for the snake. Can't take them in with him. Only one thing left when you take the other options off the table.

O'Neill's going to get the lists of which of the boys from the Three Letter Agencies have been waving the "Go Team Snake" banner all the way, and it'll be *his* fucking job to clean that end of things up. Doesn't know how O'Neill's gonna do it. Doesn't care much, either. He's pretty sure O'Neill won't embrace the Borgia's solution; pity, probably, but *not his fucking problem* anymore.

By then, at least. He's not there yet.

So he sits on his cushion on his floor, and he watches his breathing and tries to still his mind, and he uses all the techniques he was taught in service of a different ideal entirely to bring himself to a state of quiet readiness. Ignoring how dirty it makes him feel, filth not of body or mind but of spirit, to profane his vows like this *again*, because it doesn't matter. He can't let it matter. He's got a job to do, and not quite enough time in which to do it, and he's broken every vow he's ever taken in his life except for one, the first one, the one that's shifted and expanded and slid over the years but has never faltered or fallen: *do what you need to do to bring your people home*.

Eventually, the clock in the back of his head lets him know it's time to rise. (Year's at the spring, day's at the morn, and after that the dark, and may there be no sadness of farewell when I embark.) He unfolds his legs. His hands. Stuffs his plans back into the back of his head, where they can sleep until he needs them, and even if there are no atheists in foxholes, he's never let himself pray that the contingency plans won't be needed.

0800: showtime.

Here's Johnny.

\*

He skips his morning run. Skips his coffee stop. The run will only exhaust him and the coffee will only leave him wired, and he doesn't need to check in today; either he'll be out of this by sundown or he'll be dead. Or snaked. Either one.

O'Neill still thinks Der Tag is next week. Did that deliberately. Takes a couple of days for the ping to wend its way Washington-ward (latency's a fucking bitch). If he fucks this up today, the fact he's been on radio silence should be getting there just around the time O'Neill was expecting fireworks; O'Neill won't have to wait to know that things went south. And hey. Call it his last little bit of paranoia. He trusts O'Neill, as much as he can trust anyone, but he doesn't trust the people O'Neill has to answer to. He's *pretty* sure O'Neill hasn't shared any of the details of his plan; he's *pretty* sure O'Neill has only told the President what the President needs to know, no names, no dates, no strategy. But pretty sure isn't sure enough. Better to get forgiveness than permission. Better to hand over a gift-wrapped package, situation neutralized, all's quiet on the western front.

Better that O'Neill not know the details of what he's planning either, because if O'Neill doesn't know, O'Neill can't be prosecuted for it later.

The morning sucks. He copes. Makes it into something that's happening to someone else, makes it dim and distant, some Impressionist painting: Still Life With Windowless Underground Bunker And Snake. Snakes, to be precise; as they trickle in from hither and yon, they can't seem to resist coming down for a peek at all the gardens of earthly delights, down here to a sunless sea. He sits cross-legged on the conference table with his laptop on his knees and tries not to look like he's wishing they could be upstairs in the executive conference room, with its windows and its glass walls, instead of down here where secrets won't be plain to anyone who walks by. Can't let the proletariat think they're seeing double (or triple, or sextuple), after all.

Virta spends the whole day down here with them too, helping him organize and catalog and sift. He makes himself smile when Virta cracks jokes at him. It's easier than he thought it would be.

Some of the snakes watch him, curiously, as they drift in and then away again. They're all dressed in Earth-normal, but he thinks he can tell which ones have lived here from the ones who have been minding the store in the galaxy at large. The ones who haven't been stationed here are the ones that are looking at him like they're trying to decide what he'd look like naked and pleading, and it makes him want to shudder even though he knows he can't let them see.

Surprise. The ones who live here are the ones who have learned how to think of humans as something other than meat, than clothing to wear, than puppets or cattle. (Surprise. The tangible palpable weight of a snake's regard that he thought he remembered, that he thought he was coping with, was the dilute version.)

Eventually, when the clock in his head ticks over to 1300, he stands and stretches. "Gonna go find my minion and make sure he hasn't burned the building down while I wasn't paying attention," he announces, to nobody in particular. "Then get some lunch before the thing. Anybody want me to bring back a pizza?"

Seven clones in the room, plus him. None of them look up. Tough crowd.

Out the door, laptop tucked under one arm, and the air down here in the basement -- the Bat Cave is tucked down behind the boiler room -- smells faintly of damp and mold, but he doesn't give a fuck. Feels like he's breathing freely for the first time in hours.

Up-up-up the stairs, and he drops his laptop off in his office. Griffith's not at his desk, but that's all right; he's not supposed to be. He finds Griffith over in the Happy Hacker Haven, leaning a hip on Suzuki's desk and chatting her up with that sweet Southern affability. "Lunch," he says, pointing at Griffith, then looks at Suzuki. "Stealing him, sorry."

Suzuki gives him a death glare -- yeah, she's still holding a grudge about that threat thing, but that's fine, because *he's* still holding a grudge about the held-at-gunpoint thing, so they're even -- and nods. "Fine," she says, and then it's all smiles and sighs back in Griffith's direction. "I'll see you later, Spence."

"Sure thing," Griffith says, easy and amiable, and falls into step behind him as they head back over to the elevator.

They hit up the Market for lunch -- okay, okay, he's *really* going to miss Sabra's falafel; he keeps forgetting about food but theirs is pretty good when he remembers -- and Griffith, thank fuck, is smarter than to even hint that it's anything other than every day ever. He's halfway through giving Griffith a list of things he wants the kid to work on for the rest of the week (entirely invented, but well within the realm of plausibility) when he stops and snaps his fingers. "Just remembered. Your girlfriend mention anything about that project I asked her to look into for me?"

Griffith rolls his eyes. "She's not my girlfriend," he says, and hey, the irritation doesn't even sound fake. "But yeah, she said she'd have it done for you this afternoon. By after the exec meeting, at latest."

He nods, like it's barely important, even though Griffith's just given him Suzuki's confirmation that she's sure she can clear out anything the snake shouldn't have. "Great, thanks," he says, and it's back to discussing budgets and spreadsheets and all the other things he's going to be thrilled to be able to leave behind -- part of the things he's going to be thrilled to leave behind, anyway -- for the rest of the meal.

They're back to the building by 1355, and they're past security and halfway through the lobby when he snaps his fingers again and stops their forward progress. "Forgot that I was supposed to stop down in the lab before Meeting Hell this afternoon," he says. "If I do it now, I'll be late. Here." He hands Griffith his keycard, the one that'll get him anywhere in the building. "Go get those reports for me and put them on my desk, willya?"

"Yeah, no problem," Griffith says. "I just need to go upstairs first."

He's already counting off the seconds in his head as they part.

\*

1400. He hits the Bat Cave right on the nose. Supposed to be a Jaffa standing guard outside the door; there isn't. Good sign. Means the snake hasn't fucked him yet. (Ha. Ha.)

The nest of vipers doesn't even look up as he enters the room. For a second it feels like there's hundreds of them, but of course there isn't. Triple dozen, all told, Ba'al-embodied and otherwise. More of them look like the Ba'al-body he's come to know and love than not, but there are others in the room, too; Mayfield, Virta. A few others, faces he doesn't recognize. He doesn't know which ones are *the* snake, which ones are just *a* snake, but it doesn't matter. He slides into a seat at the end of the table, folds his hands together, and waits.

The snakes are arguing in quiet voices, catching up on the gossip from the great out there, bitching about the quality of the coffee from the refreshments table that Esmeralda the Wonder Secretary set up on the sidebar this morning. Talking about strategies and goals and plans and galactic domination. Like every single pre-meeting mill of people from now back to the dawn of time. None of them try to loop him into their conversations. It's all right; he doesn't particularly need them to.

He should feel out of place here, among the mill and crush of bodies passing bodies, voices murmuring annoyance at being made to *stay waiting* for the last remaining member of the guest list. He should feel itchy and sensitized, uncertain beneath the weight of so many snakes in such small space, his primitive hindbrain flashing *danger, danger, danger*. He should be nervous, counting up all the ways this could lead to disaster, adding up the tally of potential pitfalls and preparing to meet them all. He's not. He's counting down instead, and somewhere in the back of his head, there's an LED readout glowing red, ticking by each second. T-minus five. 4:59. 4:58.

*Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves, be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.* Yeah. Got the serpent part. Give him long enough and he might even make it back to wisdom. Little fuzzy on the concept of 'harmless' these days, though.

4:32. 4:31. Just him and the snakes, alone in this room where they've come to speak of shoes and ships and sealing-wax, of cabbages and kings, and he's been pointed straight at this moment for six fucking months like a spear loosed from the hand of a charioteer, O'Neill's right hand (*lámh dhearg abú*), armed again, his red right hand to plague us.

The tiny canister's been sitting in his jeans since he rose from his cushions this morning. None of the snakes look twice at him as he stretches his legs out under the table, slides his hands into his pockets like he's just slouching sullenly. The metal is warm with the heat of his body by now, radiant, ambient. He's always been good at sleight of hand; even if one of them were watching him, they wouldn't notice. He palms it out, thumbs it active, sticks it to the underside of the table. He can't hear it hissing at all, and he knows the sound of the voices around him will cover the noise for any of the snakes that might.

"He *called* this meeting," one of the Ba'al-snakes says, sharp and irritated. "Jack. Go find our last straggler. I'd like to get on with this."

(1:31. 1:30. 1:29. 1:28.)

He slouches to his feet, saunters over to the door. "Sure," he says. Turns back around as soon as his hand hits the doorknob, in his very finest Columbo impression; all he needs is the overcoat and the slouch. "There's just one thing you can do *for me*, first."

The aerosolized symbiote poison's already starting to hit the ones closest to where he was sitting. The snake who'd been standing next to him, one of the ones he'd never known to name, pitches over, seizing uncontrollably. Froth of spittle and blood on its lips. Foxtrot's farthest away; it takes a step, then another, but a third is too much for it to manage. Alpha's quick enough to see that something's wrong, but not quick enough to reach its phone. That's the biggest danger. There's enough time between when they know and when they stop moving, and he's watching, watching, but none of them manage to get close to calling down the alarm. :39. :38. :37.

He leans against the door, comfortably blocking the room's only escape, his arms folded over his chest, watching. Waiting. It's an anticlimax.

He always knew it would be.

Zero.

"Thanks," he tells the silent room, the grotesque bodies, lying twisted and distorted wherever they fell. "Preciate it."

Then he bends down, pulls his knife out of its ankle-sheath, and goes around the room. Quickly, but not rushed; haste makes waste and hurry makes for fuckups. In through the base of the neck, right between C7 and T1, the point of the knife slipping through flesh and sinew to bury itself (sickening, satisfying) in the swollen and bloated symbiote-body lurking beneath the surface. Flick. *Slice*. He keeps his knife sharp.

You don't leave an enemy behind you, not without making sure it's dead first.

He'll be back with a zat as soon as he can -- nobody knows this room is here but the Jaffa and the snakes who are dead on the floor, but you don't leave bodies behind you, either, not if the discovery of those bodies could raise a hue and cry. For now, it's *rise up, my fair one, and come away, come away*. He wipes the knife clean on the shirt of the last snake he makes sure of. (Echo. The ThinkGeek t-shirt today says *there's no place like 127.0.0.1*.)

Re-stows the blade. Checks the clock in his head. 1415, and the seconds are ticking up and not down now: 4:21, 4:22, 4:23. He takes one last look around him, turns for the door. Stops. Turns back.

Virta's body is halfway down the room, sprawled out on the floor, one hand flopped as though it had been trying to push itself back up even as it had been dying. He stands over it for a minute. Can't quite tell what he's thinking. Something about snakes, and hosts, and how you can't save everyone, and how he's not supposed to believe that some people don't deserve saving in the first place. Then he pulls back one foot and drives it into Virta's side, so sharply he can hear dead ribs cracking beneath his toes.

Doesn't make him feel better. Hadn't thought it would.

5:05, 5:06, and he grabs the first access card that comes to hand (Griffith has his) and turns around to go again, but something's wrong. Something's fucked. He's always had a warning klaxon in the back of his head, the tiny sixth sense alerting him when the natives are restless or the ship's about to blow, and it's caroling now. Not loud enough to make him think they've been betrayed, but loud enough to make him break into a lope (not a run, never a run; running attracts attention, even down here where the only company comes from rats and cockroaches and minions of the snake) through the basement and towards the rendezvous.

Griffith's not there, not waiting for him, and that's enough to tell him they might be running on borrowed time.

Past the pipes, past the boilers, and there's a door back there that nobody's supposed to notice, tucked away in the corner. He cards it open. Flight of stairs behind it, and he's running now, two and three at a time, vaulting around the turn and landing catlike on his feet halfway down. Another door at the bottom.

It's a rabbit warren down here, tunnels crossing and criss-crossing, dug out of the earth by any means fair or foul, butting up against the fire-destroyed remnants of old Seattle and shored up and tucked away. Half the time you can't get here from there. The Bat Cave is on the fourth subterranean floor. O-chem lab is two flights down, behind doors and doors again; cloning lab behind the O-chem lab, tucked away through another door. (He's been in there twice; there's something revolting about all the little snakes in all their little vats, all the Ba'al-bodies, grey and lumpen and still, floating in their tubes and waiting for the breath of life.) Corporate security's on Underground One, the security offices that are above-board and legit. The *real* security's on three. If anyone's managed to figure out what's going on -- if he missed a snake in the *Schlangendämmerung*, if Delta's been playing them all along and is about to end the game -- there's a whole floor full of Jaffa between them and freedom.

He'd given Griffith directions. Instructions. Fuck it, he's given Griffith *orders*, and Griffith hadn't been where he was supposed to be, and that means something's fucked.

Through another tunnel-corridor, down-down-down the stairs, the map of the land shining in his head -- last thing he fucking needs is to take a wrong fucking turn -- and the door to the O-chem lab is shut, and he knows damn well the room is soundproofed. No window to peek through. No way of knowing what's on the other side of the door. *And fuck it all to hell and back*, he forgot to check the snakes before he left, forgot to look for a weapon better than his fucking *switchblade*, and if that's the fucking mistake that fucking kills them both he might have to kill himself again, because it's a fucking amateur's mistake. No time to fix it. He drops low as he cards through the door. *Hey, Griffith. Cavalry's here*.

And Griffith's job in all of this was simple, fucking child's play really; sweet-talk his way past Esmeralda the Wonder Secretary, get into the snake's office, liberate the zat from the desk drawer (third down, on the left). Take it down to the lab with him. Zat the mad scientists into oblivion, zip tie them while they were unconscious, smash what he could, and get back up to the rendezvous. Surgical strike, while the snake (last snake standing) is distracted. Couldn't do this all at once, not by himself, and the way to make sure that you hit all the targets before they come to take you out is to sow the maximum amount of chaos and confusion all at once. Sometimes you need an extra pair of hands.

Last snake left didn't know about this part of the plan. Hell, *Griffith* doesn't know all of this part of the plan; he's told Griffith enough, and he's pretty sure Griffith deduced he was planning on coming back down and finishing off the job, but he fucking wasn't going to ask the kid to be his contract assassin. Still. If the snake figured out what's going on down here, there's a pretty fucking good chance it's decided the deal is off. If it hadn't decided that already.

He's not expecting what he sees when the door does clear his line of sight.

The scan of the room is automatic. (*Where are the threats?*) Only takes him a second to place Griffith: on the floor, other side of the lab, back to the door. Kneeling over a face-down, faintly-struggling body. One knee in the guy's kidneys. One arm looped around the guy's neck. Pulling him back: textbook choke hold. Blood on the floor; no knowing who it belongs to. He flicks his eyes around the room, adding up numbers, drawing his tactical map. Six stationed in the lab. He places five, unconscious or dead, ziptied and secure. The one Griffith's fighting makes six. There are overturned vials and flasks everywhere the eye can see.

The kid wasn't supposed to fight a battle here. One of the lab boys must have woken up from zat-stun before Griffith could get him secured.

As he straightens up, shuts the door behind him, the man Griffith's choking makes a tight sound. The hands clawing at Griffith's forearms slacken, fall. He's already moving forward to take care of the cleanup -- his job, his problem, and he *will not* allow himself to be responsible for some other good man's nightmares -- when Griffith bears his weight down on the guy's shoulders. Twists sideways.

Quick, practiced. The *snap* of the man's neck breaking echoes sharply in the space between them.

It's not the only sound. There's some soft gurgle, and a keening whimper, and he can't tell where it's coming from.

"Nielson, at the door," he says, because Griffith would have heard the sound of the door opening and he knows, *knows*, that in the few seconds straight after someone wins and someone loses the instinct is to look around for the next threat and it's hard to tell friend from foe. He's stepping closer, getting ready to move in and take over, when Griffith turns his head at the sound of someone speaking and --

*Jesus fucking Christ.*

Acid. Has to have been. Face swelling, necrotic skin giving way, blisters rising and breaking open, charred white. Flecks of bone, visible beneath the black and the red, blood pooling and pouring free, flesh being eaten away still. Tears flowing down Griffith's face, or not tears at all, because --

Jesus, his *eyes*. Two soft puddles, deflated balloons, shriveled grapes. The viscous jelly is smeared down Griffith's face, aqueous and vitreous, mixing with blood and pus and lymph.

His stomach heaves, and he catches himself a scant second before he vomits.

No time to stop and think. No time to let himself be affected by the sound of Griffith's whimpers, by the smell (oh Christ the *smell*), by the way (sweet fucking Jesus) Griffith's hanging on, holding up, not clawing at his face or rolling on the floor or shrieking loud enough to raise the alarm. Just flailing one hand around, blindly, feeling for something (anything) to *make it stop hurting*.

"Stop that," he snaps, because there's shit puddled on the floor and he has no idea what it might be, and he's there at Griffith's side before Griffith can finish trying to figure out where his voice is coming from. "I've got you. Stop moving. Christ, *stop fucking moving*," and he's been here before, watched men suffer and die, bleed out beneath his fucking hands and he couldn't fucking save them and he *fucking will not fucking let it fucking happen here*.

No way of knowing what chemical it was. No way of knowing what'll neutralize it. The only thing he can think of is to get it away, *get it off*, stop it from getting any worse, and thank fuck there's a chemical shower hose (*because OSHA will come and inspect your secret fucking lab*) on the wall. "Shower," he says. Trying to keep his voice even, *nothing to worry about here, I'm in control, I'm motherfucking in control*. "Tilt your head back --"

And Griffith swallows, hard, and for a second he thinks he's lost the man, but then Griffith shudders and heaves and *does*, wrecked face tilting upwards. And good *God*, he knew the man was good; now he knows the man is amazing. Griffith's shivering and gasping, the last of the battle-adrenaline slipping away, and he can't even find a safe space to put his hand on Griffith's shoulder while he sluices the acid from Griffith's skin.

By the time he's got Griffith as hosed down as possible, they're both shuddering, and Griffith's whimpers have turned into moans. "ad s't?" Griffith manages, *how bad is it* through what's left of his lips, and even if they got him to a hospital in the next fucking thirty seconds there's no road that leads to him coming out of this even in the same *zip code* as okay.

*He will not let that happen.*

"Bad," he says. Never believed in lying to a man down, and Griffith knows full fucking well how bad it is. He tosses the shower aside. It hits the dead guy as it goes, still spraying water. He knows what he has to do. "But not permanent. Come on. On your feet. I'll take your weight. I just need as much help as you can give me."

Must take a second for the words to penetrate the haze of agony Griffith's in, but he hopes the tone (calm and controlled and *not fucking panicking*) helps. "Can't ... lobby," Griffith wheezes. "eole."

*Can't go out the lobby, there are people*, and Jesus fucking *Christ* if you gave him a whole unit full of men like this, he could conquer *galaxies*.

"We're not going out the lobby," he says, looking for two places he can put his hands, looking for two places where he won't be touching parts of Griffith's skin that are blackened and oozing. "We're not going to the hospital, either. I've got you. We're going to fix this. Come on. Coming around, your five. Hands under your armpits. Dead guy's arms at eleven and two; don't trip. On three. One, two --"

He gets Griffith to his feet, ducks under his arm, takes his weight. Griffith slumps against him. Sags. For a minute he thinks he'll have to get Griffith up in fireman's carry, and that would fucking *suck* because Griffith's got forty pounds on him easy, but a second or two and Griffith rallies. Just enough. "Okay," he says, calm and controlled, telling Griffith (with touch, with words -- all Griffith has right now, the only parts of Griffith's world beyond the pain and the darkness) that there's nothing to be worried about. (Lie. There's plenty to be worried about. He's not going to show it. Not going to show any of it, not going to let himself *feel* any of it, not going to think about --)

"Clear shot straight there, nothing else in the way," he says. "Not far to go. I'll steer. You lean. Just lean your weight against me and I'll get you there. Come on. Come on, Griffith, stay with me five minutes more. Just a little bit to go, and then it'll all be okay."

The pain must be unbearable, but Griffith bears up under it. Takes a step, or maybe a stumble, pitching forward, and thank fuck he's had a fuck of a lot of practice in fitting his steps to someone else's in the past few years because he needs every fucking inch of it now. He holds Griffith up, steady stream of words flowing from his lips, encouragement and description and strength: we're clear, you're good, twenty more steps, ten. Five.

Door to the cloning lab is in the corner of the O-chem lab.

Sarcophagus is in the corner of the cloning lab.

\*

*Ding.*

\*

Griffith sits up the minute the little miracle box spits him out. Hands clawing up to his face. Eyes blinking wildly. Chest heaving like he's trying to remember how to scream.

"You're clear," he says, the minute Griffith rises. Calm, controlled. Competent. He's sitting on the counter across from the



sarcophagus, zat in his lap, waiting, one eye on the door. Helps to have a trusted face there for you when you come back from the light, and he's the closest thing to a trusted face Griffith's going to get here.

Griffith's face is smooth and unmarked. Whole. Complete. He's swinging his eyes around the room, enough to confirm he can see, even if his brain's not quite *processing* yet.

"Fuck," Griffith says, on a shuddering breath. "*Fuck*."

"Pretty much, yeah," he agrees. He puts a hand down on the lab bench, uses it as a pivot to leap down. The clock in his head is ticking, siren's-song of *urgent, danger*, busted fucking timelines strewn in pieces across the floor. Doesn't matter. They have to take time for this. "You're going to be a bit shaky. Look at me."

Griffith does, slow and cautious. Blinks. Blinks again. Eyes watering, fingertips questing across healthy skin as though they can't quite credit what they're touching. He remembers that part. You go into the box with parts of your body flaring out and dying, and you come out of the box with everything re-set to factory default, and it doesn't matter, because the brain *remembers*.

"*Jesus*," Griffith says, but it's a prayer, not an oath. And yeah: not quite a Glorious Resurrection, but if he'd been five minutes slower, it might have been. "They told us about -- I didn't think --"

He cuts Griffith off. Hates having to do it, because in a just and righteous universe Griffith would have earned a chance to fucking recover, but in a just and righteous universe Griffith wouldn't have fucking been through this in the first place. "I know," he says. "I *know*. You have no idea how much I know. But we're on negative time." He holds out a hand. "You can stand up. I know it doesn't feel like it right now, but you can. Come on."

Griffith stares at him, blankly, and for a second he fears Griffith might be one of the ones who come out of the box whole in flesh but not in spirit. "Come on," he repeats, gesturing impatiently. "I've only cleaned up what I could from here. More to go. But we're almost out of here."

Another second, and he knows that part too, *remembers* that part, the way you come out of the box feeling slow and stupid and full of haze. But Griffith shakes himself, gets a fucking grip, and it takes both of them to get Griffith out of the fucking box but they finally get him clear.

Moving just fine -- slow, but steady -- and that's what he was looking for, because it means the box did its fucking job all the way. Griffith takes a cautious and uncertain step, and when his knees don't collapse out from under him, another. As he watches, Griffith stands up straight. Squares his shoulders. He can see Griffith conquering the freak-out, writing his brain an IOU for the nervous breakdown later.

"Okay," Griffith says looking around the cloning lab as though he's seeing it for the first time. (Because, hey, he *is*.) Room's small, but it looks larger now than it had when they'd come in. While Griffith had been in the box, he'd taken the zat to this room, the room outside, triple-shooting vats and tubes and bodies to oblivion. The box is the only thing left. "How are we gonna --"

He doesn't wait for Griffith to finish asking the question. Just lifts the zat he's still got in his hand and shoots the sarcophagus. Once. Twice. "*Hey* --" Griffith's protesting, loud in his ears, as he shoots the third like a dead man's match flaring into darkness, and the room is filled with the sudden electric-ozone tang of abused atoms all releasing their stored energy at once and flying apart.

Griffith slams into his side, intending to foul his aim, but it's too late. It was too late from the moment he was satisfied that Griffith was as all right as he could be. Couldn't let himself wait to do it, or else he might not have done it at all.

"What the *goddamn fuck*?" Griffith demands. "What -- why did you -- you could have --"

And he knows exactly what Griffith means, knows exactly whose set of injuries Griffith was thinking of trying to heal, because he'd thought it too. In the basement of his enemy's stronghold, waiting and watching, alone with his nightmares. And oh, God, he'd *wanted* --

But every tool is a weapon in disguise. And the tools that make you want to use them most, the ones that lure you with their siren's promise and their shining potential, are the ones that you can't ever let anyone, even yourself, use as a weapon. Against you. Against anyone.

He remembers that now. It fucking took him long enough.

And now is not the fucking time for this, and later might not be the time for it either; he'll schedule the conversation for the twelfth of fucking *never*, but he has to give Griffith something or they'll be standing here when the cows come fucking home. "Because he wouldn't fucking thank you for it," he snaps, and Griffith's staring at him and he can *tel* Griffith doesn't understand.

Fuck it. He'll cut the man some slack, because it's hard to keep proper field discipline when your CO looks younger than some of your kid cousins -- not to mention the way the goddamn box leaves you feeling like the whole world's out of tune -- but it took twenty-one fucking minutes for the box to spit Griffith back out and that's twenty minutes and thirty seconds past when they should have been out of here. "Come on. I said move it. I really don't want to have to leave you here alone when I run back upstairs and dispose of the bodies."

Griffith opens his mouth, looking like a protest is forming. Something in his face must give the man pause, though, because the mouth shuts again just as fast as it opened. "Fine," Griffith says. "But when this is over, you and I are --" He cuts himself off, reins his anger in. "Yeah. Okay. Let's go."

The O-chem lab outside the door is just as bare as the cloning lab now, zatted down to nothing more than furniture and essentials; Griffith looks around and bites his lip at all the things that aren't there. (Including the bodies. He'd caught the remaining five scientists before the zat-stun wore off and they woke up; small mercies.) He's halfway through leading the charge on the door when his brain catches up to him. He detours back over to the rack on the wall, grabs two of the lab coats hanging there, shoves one of them at Griffith. "Into that," he says. There's no way their wrecked clothing will pass muster on the street for long, but in lab coats, they can at least get out of the building without acquiring too much attention.

Griffith hesitates again, and he *remembers* that feeling, contrast and brightness tuned all out of whack and the world around him feeling over-exposed -- so he tries to conceal his impatience, just shakes the lab coat at Griffith again: *come on*. And some of his urgency must transmit itself through the air between them, because Griffith takes the lab coat from him and puts arms into sleeves. He shoves the zat into the waistband of his jeans, at the small of his back, and slings his own lab coat over it.

Having a weapon to hand makes him feel better. Not by much, but some.

He gets Griffith up two flights of stairs, leaves the man in decent cover while he ducks back over to the Bat Cave and zats all the snake bodies into oblivion. (He's pretty sure Delta -- *Ba'al*, now, the only *Ba'al* left -- wouldn't want to raise them up again and besides the box is gone, but loose ends should be tied up lest they trip you when you least expect them to.) Only takes him a couple of minutes, and Griffith's already looking steadier by the time he gets back.

Four more flights of stairs. Going past underground three is nerve-wracking, and he's not exactly sure he has any nerves *left*, but once they're clear, once the Jaffa stronghold is beneath them, he starts to breathe a little easier. The human contingent of the building occupants are used to seeing him wandering around at all hours, and they all know he's the snake's right-hand whatsis. With every step, their chances of getting out of here alive get better. Still. Ain't over 'til the fat lady sings.

It's wrong, somehow. Not the skulking out on cat feet part. The part where the walls around them aren't burnished gold, the part where there aren't any torches flaming, the part where it's Griffith behind him and not Teal'c or Carter. (Daniel.)

Up the stairs. Through the last underground corridor-tunnel, past the part where concrete gives way to carpet, giving Corporate Security's headquarters a wide berth. The staircase to the loading dock platform is in the northwest corner; you can get there without having to go up to the first floor. Usually deserted, this time of the afternoon.

Usually isn't always.

Delta -- *Ba'al* -- is leaning against the wall, right next to the outside door, arms folded over its chest. As patient as patient can be, waiting like it could wait all fucking week if it had to. It smiles when it sees them. Its smile is still the creepiest fucking thing he's ever seen.

He can feel his hand flutter, twitch towards the zat he can feel cool and solid at the small of his back, but *Ba'al* isn't (visibly) armed and there isn't anyone else (visibly) present. Just it, and the two of them, fifty feet and a snake between them and a clean escape.

"*There* you are," it says, sounding obscurely and obscenely pleased. "I thought I'd find you here. Took you quite long enough. That was a nice trick you pulled with crashing the surveillance system; I'm surprised you managed to find the time."

Still not totally fucked yet. "Hey," he says. Behind him, Griffith's tensing up. "Temperate rainforest. You said so yourself." Just because he's pissed at Suzuki doesn't mean he wants to hand her over. Up to her to decide how she wants to make her escape.

It laughs, and the sound is like spiders under his skin. "True," it says. "Still. I somehow suspect that I should regret not having discussed the letter of the law versus the spirit." It pushes itself off the wall, unfolds its arms. Takes a few steps forward. He holds himself still as it comes nearer; it stops just outside arm's length. Cocks its head. Watches him.

He tries for bravado, because he's got nothing left. "Everything's settled. Thanks for letting me do your dirty work for you."

It laughs again. "My pleasure, really," it says. "Are you certain I can't persuade you to remain in my employ?"

The answer to that question might make the difference between getting out of here still breathing and not getting out of here at all. The temptation to lie, to tell *Ba'al* what it wants to hear and try again later, is heavy enough on his tongue for him to almost taste it. But no. Not even for this. He's been lying for months, and the vessel of his falsehood has cracked and broken, and the lies have all run out upon the sand. All he can be now is truth.

"I'll die first," he says, and braces himself for it to come true.

But it only nods. Stares at him, eyes hot and heavy on his face, and there's a panicked animal scabbling its claws against the floors of his mind and trying to find purchase. "I had thought so, yes," it says. "I had hoped -- but then again, when I saw the lengths to which you were willing to go to avoid leaving me with anything that didn't quite fit into the bargain you so skillfully constructed, I think I knew the answer. Pity, really. We could have ruled the galaxy, you and I. I suppose there's a universe somewhere in which we did."

It takes a step back, and it's a mark of how tired or fried or just plain *over it* he is that it takes him a minute to realize the snake isn't standing between them and the door anymore. "My end of the bargain," it says, and he tenses as the snake reaches into its pocket, but it only takes out a thumb drive, tosses it at him. No, *to* him. An easy underhanded throw, and he catches it, and it's heavier than it fucking should be.

"Give my regards to General O'Neill," *Ba'al* says, and turns its back to walk down the hallway and away.

His fingers itch to reach for the zat and shoot the snake down. But the snake's right: they've made a bargain. And he won't be the one to break it.

He raises his voice. "You know that if you take one step over the line, I'll be back to hunt you down myself."

*Ba'al* pauses. Turns. Smiles, and it's beautiful, an expression of pure delight. "My dear JD," it says. "I would expect nothing less." It bows, and there's nothing mocking about it. "I wish you pleasant dreams."

*Fucker.*

His hand is shaking as he lifts it. To his ear, not to the small of his back: to the earpiece nestled there, tie and tether, anchor and anvil. It isn't heavy enough to throw properly. He makes a good attempt at it anyway, and it clatters uselessly to the floor. The phone itself has better heft, and it goes sailing straight past the snake's head. The snake doesn't bother trying to catch it, just keeps going down the hallway, its back bare and unprotected, walking away.

He watches for a minute, thinking of all the things he could do, thinking of all the things he should do, thinking of all the things he's leaving undone behind him. Then he turns and leads Griffith out into the light.

\*

Downtown Seattle.

He's stuck on fucking autopilot, and Griffith's not much better, but this is one of the plans he's been holding onto for a while. Doesn't take much brainpower. He walks them up to the convention center, picks up a cab at the cab-stand, has it take them to the airport. O'Neill had sent Griffith with a few different sets of papers for him. They're probably all tripwired. Doesn't much matter. It's over, and if they want to pick him up, he'll put his hands in the air and come along peacefully.

Mostly peacefully. He doesn't need to make it *easy* for them.

He rents the car on one of the sets of plastic O'Neill had sent, gets Griffith into the passenger's seat and points the 4Runner (fucking ridiculous oversized thing) south on I-5. Watches the rear-view mirror the whole way. Traffic's a fucking donkeyfucker. Griffith's quiet. Too quiet. It's not the kind of quiet that comes from trauma; it's the kind of quiet that says the man's thinking about things, adding things up, coming to conclusion after conclusion. Unwanted. Unwelcome. Inevitable.

Eventually, he can't stand it anymore. "Pretty sure we're clear," he says. "You might want to put your seat back and take a nap. That thing uses your body's resources to fix you."

Griffith's voice is just as quiet as his silence was. "Think I'll pass, thanks."

He doesn't turn his head to look, just sweeps his eyes over the road behind the car. Late afternoon out there, sun shining bright and reflecting off everything, which is not the best time of day to spot a tail. He doesn't think they *are* being tailed -- by Ba'al, by the boys from the Three Letter Agencies, by someone O'Neill might have sent -- but the habit of paranoia is hard to unlearn. "That have to do with the adrenaline rush," he says, "or do you just not want to be asleep in a car with me?"

Griffith snorts. "Little of both," he admits.

He nods. "Yeah," he says. "Figured."

Pauses, waits to see if Griffith will fill in the silence -- most human beings, once a conversation has been started, will blurt out anything once a silence has grown large enough to acquire palpable weight -- but apparently Griffith's immune to the trick, because all Griffith is doing is staring out the window. "You got anything in particular you want to talk about?" he finally asks. There are so many candidates for "primary thing freaking Griffith the fuck out" right now. He doesn't want to assume he knows.

"Want to, no," Griffith says. "Probably should, yeah." Then he pauses too. Nice to know they both know the trick.

He pulls around a SUV with a "honk if you love Cthulhu" bumper sticker and waits for Griffith to go on. And Griffith's good at the silence game, but he can wait for a long damn time when he has to, and Griffith doesn't have enough practice in learning how not to crack. "How much of that did you know you'd have to do when you went under?" Griffith finally asks.

His fingers tense on the steering wheel. He makes himself relax them. That question is really *how much of that did you know I'd have to go through when you called me in*, and he's not ready to answer that yet, to Griffith or to himself. But it's been asked, and he owes Griffith a lot of things, but most of all he owes Griffith answers.

"Most of it," he says, squinting against the sunlight. Forgot a pair of sunglasses. "The snake and I have ... history."

"Yeah," Griffith says. "Got that. Kinda."

He can't tell what Griffith means by it, but he'll let it go by. Unless Griffith needs to talk. He looks over, and he's not at all surprised to see Griffith is staring down at his hands, flexing his fingers as though he's trying to make sure they're all still attached, as though he's remembering what those hands have had to do.

"You did a good job back there," he says, as the silence stretches out between them. "I was glad to have you."

It doesn't earn him a thank you, doesn't earn him anything but a tiny twitch of Griffith's lips, the kind of smile that stands in for *you've said something I should say thank you for, but I don't want to lay claim to it*. "How much of that did Uncle Cam know you'd have to do?" Griffith asks.

His first response is anger: *that's personal, and it's none of your fucking business*. But anger is almost always fear or shame in disguise, and he made it Griffith's business. That's the problem with trying to command family; the personal shit and the duty shit all gets tangled up together, until you can't keep things in their proper boxes anymore, and it's a lesson he should have fucking remembered, and please God let him never have to do it again.

(Never do any of this again, now that this is over, never step back into these shoes and never again pick up this -- no, no, *not yet*. They're out but they're not clear, it's ending but it hasn't ended, and he *cannot let himself feel it yet*.)

So he keeps his hands on the wheel and steers the car steadily away, away, *away* from Seattle and all it fucking stands for. "Most of it," he says, keeping his voice even. "Not all. But most."

Next to him, Griffith pulls his legs up, braces the bottoms of his feet against the dash, draws his knees up to his chest. "He loves you," Griffith says.

And he owes Griffith a fuck of a lot, and he will until the end of days, but he doesn't owe Griffith this much. "Say it," he says. "Go ahead and fucking say it."

For a second he thinks Griffith won't. Thinks Griffith has heard the warning siren in his voice, thinks Griffith is smart enough to remember all the moments when the man looked at him and saw *danger*. But then Griffith takes a deep breath, doesn't look over at him, and he realizes Griffith is smart enough to remember the danger, but thinks this is more important. "You could have healed him."

And, hell. Griffith's not having trouble coping with what's gone down; Griffith's *angry*, a quiet cold anger so unlike the Mitchell fast-and-furious flashstorm. And anger is almost always fear or shame in disguise, but sometimes it isn't. Sometimes it's just rage on behalf of someone you love.

So he lifts a hand off the steering wheel, scrubs it over his face, makes himself bite back his first five possible responses. "Yeah," he says. Voice calm and even. Trying not to show how much this conversation is costing. "I did. Because it's a monkey's paw wish, and I know what it would turn him into. And I told you. He wouldn't thank you for it."

He looks over again, and he can see Griffith doesn't understand. *Can't* understand, not until he sees it, not until he's been there for more than just a simple healing in the heat of battle. The box is tainted, like everything that comes from the snakes. Doesn't just undo your damage. Makes you bigger, better, faster, more. Comes with a price. Everything does. Daniel called it your soul, and he doesn't believe in the soul -- not as something that can be touched or tasted or quantified, not as something that can be flensed away, fleck by fleck, by a machine. But he remembers. Waking each time, bright lights bearing down, stripping away all pretense, feeling ill-fitted. Repaired, but not untouched. *Wrong*, ever after, and some of the feeling had gone away, and some of it never will.

And he doesn't just love Mitchell (and oh, God, he loves Mitchell, loves Mitchell *so goddamn fucking much*). He *knows* Mitchell. Knows him, down deep. *Partners*. (*For now, for always, forever, for everything*, Mitchell's voice in his memory, and he's spent six goddamn months not letting himself think about Mitchell, not letting himself remember that conversation, because the minute he does he's gone.)

Griffith's opening his mouth. To protest, and he doesn't want to hear it, doesn't want to be having this conversation, doesn't want to fucking *justify* the choices he's made that weren't choices after all, because the only other alternative would be even worse.

"Think about it," he says, cutting Griffith off before he can go any further. "Box is in the basement. Assume you can justify leaving that *thing* in the snake's hands. Assume you can hold your position for long enough, or make a bargain with the snake to get back in." Griffith tenses at that, and yeah, okay, he knows what Griffith's thinking, knows Griffith's wondering why he'd quail at selling one *more* piece of his soul to the snake for a chance at the Holy Grail, but he is *not fucking going there* until and unless Griffith drags him.

The words rush out of him, faster and faster, and he can hear his voice starting to rise. "What then? Because that thing is poison, if you keep using it sooner or later it makes you *wrong*, but the thing that makes you even more wrong is having to decide who *gets* to, who lives and who has to die, who's worthy and who isn't, and there is a fucking *line* and he would hate himself for having crossed it. Assume the thing even *can* heal him, which is not a fucking given with injuries that old, and he gets out of the box, okay, he's fine, he's standing, and it's all fine for a day or a week or a month until he starts thinking about all the people who couldn't get there, couldn't make that bargain, and then he starts thinking about what that bargain fucking cost, and he sits up all night because it won't let him rest, until he starts blaming himself for being selfish, for being willing to take that get-out-of-jail-free card, for being *grateful* to a fucking snake for the fucking get-out-of-jail-free card, and when you live long enough with that kind of poison seeping into your ears, wondering what your little miracle cost you and wondering how many other people you should have saved and wondering whether the price you had to pay was worth it, wondering how you could have fucking broken all your promises to yourself about never going there again, you go fucking crazy, all right?"

He's shouting. He makes himself stop. The words echo in the tiny enclosed space between them.

"You're not talking about him," Griffith says. "Are you."

And all he wants to do is close his eyes, crawl into some dark fucking *hole* somewhere and sleep for a day or a fucking week, and he can't, there isn't, it's too --

"Yeah," he says. "Yeah. No. Fuck."

Silence again, and he can feel Griffith's eyes, hot on the side of his face, and he won't let himself turn to look. "So someone has to make the call," Griffith says, and it's a challenge and an understanding all at once. "And you figure better you than him, because at least you're used to living with what comes after."

"I love him," he says, and the words burn his throat. "And this is how it had to be."

Sometimes you don't have a choice. Sometimes you have a choice, and none of the options are good ones. Sometimes there's nothing you can do and still say you did the right thing.

He'll tell Mitchell what he did, and why he did it. Might fuck things for a while. Might fuck things forever. He doesn't know. But he can see the scenario playing out in his head, as clear as daylight, and he *knows* how it would have gone down. Mitchell would have grown to hate himself for being selfish, and sooner or later Mitchell would have grown to hate *him* for putting Mitchell in that position. And if Mitchell's going to hate him either way, at least he can make sure that Mitchell doesn't hate himself too.

No. Have faith. Mitchell will understand. Mitchell will understand all of it.

Please God let Mitchell understand all of it.

Griffith sighs. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Griffith hugging his knees to his chest, turning his head to look out the window. Looking young, so young, and it just drives home to him again how much weight he's layered on Griffith's shoulders, how many of Griffith's own personal nightmares in twenty years might be traceable back to his hands. His fucking fault. He feels old, old and tired and weary, weighed down with duty and responsibility and blame.

"I still don't understand," Griffith says, but at least it's not an accusation anymore. It's just tired too, tired and a little bit sad.

All he wants, out of this life or any other, is to never have to make these decisions again. Bargain with a snake, because you have to. Take another's life, because you have to. Take away your lover's only hope of wholeness, because you have to. Use a good man's trust and loyalty and commitment, use it as ruthlessly as you would use your own, because you fucking have to, because there's something you're trying to serve and it's worth it, it's fucking *worth* it, it's worth it because it has to be, it's worth it because it's the only thing left.

"Keep doing this job for long enough," he says, quiet and calm (like razors in the dark, like bleeding out on the floor before you even notice you've been hit, like the last breath you get to take). "You will."

Griffith takes a deep breath. Lets it out. Looks like he wants to say something. Doesn't. Thank fuck for small mercies.

Another ten miles slip away in silence. He's counting. They're past Tacoma by now; they'll make Portland by mid-evening. Not far. Nice flat boring drive, clear sailing to the next port of call. Theoretically there's nobody chasing them, and it's not even good cover -- closest major city to Seattle; it's a given they'd head there or Vancouver, and there's whole host of problems involved with a border crossing -- but he couldn't have kept them in Seattle. Emotions instead of logistics, maybe. He doesn't think he's going to be able to go back to Seattle for a long damn time.

"So what now?" Griffith finally asks, and it's the sound of someone who's ready to let the previous conversation drop but just doesn't want to fucking live with the sound of his own thoughts anymore. He can sympathize.

"Heading for Portland," he says. "We'll find a motel. I'll call in and report. You can get on a plane to DC tomorrow morning. Fuck of a lot of debrief, but you'll be able to start putting your life back together by Monday."

Won't be easy. There'll be a hundred questions and interrogations, not to *mention* trying to fucking explain things to the family. He'll let Griffith figure out how to handle his part of that. Take the cues from what Griffith decides. His cleanup is going to be a fuck of a lot worse.

Griffith shifts in the seat next to him, lets his legs down. "You?"

He shakes his head. "I'm not going to DC. We realized a long time ago that we shouldn't spend much time around each other. Easier that way."

Only one person he could mean.

"You are him, aren't you," Griffith says. Quietly. Not a question, not quite. "Or were."

Too much to hope for, really, that Griffith wouldn't put it together. Told Griffith he was older than he looked. Told Griffith he came from the SGC. Told Griffith he'd been Xeroxed and set aside. Has been giving himself away to Griffith a thousand ways, a thousand times, since the moment he called for help and Griffith rose to answer, and he should have realized this would happen, and he's so damn tired he can't even bring himself to care that Griffith knows. Maybe it's a relief. Maybe it's a reminder. Maybe it's just another piece he'll have to hold.

"Yeah," he says. Truth. Not-truth. He doesn't even fucking know anymore. "Once upon a time. It was a long damn time ago."

Underneath his shirt, he can feel the lines of his tattoos burning. Memory and memorial, reminder and warning. His stories hidden from others in plain view, encoded into words and symbols that only he can read. Two sentences written along his collarbone, mirroring the point-of-origin. Framing it. One of them means *where you come from can never be taken away*.

The other one means *when the fall is all there is, it matters*.

\*

Over and done. Mission accomplished. Just a whole bunch of fucking bits to clean up.

Griffith eventually drifts off to sleep, restless and unsettled, head leaning against the window of the SUV. Wakes up when they pull into the parking lot of the Target; jerks straight upright, face alien and ragged in the setting sun. "It's okay," he says, before Griffith can panic. "Supply run. Back in fifteen."

Griffith's still awake when he gets back out, two bags each containing toothbrush and toothpaste, t-shirts and jeans and underwear. One eye open, sweeping the parking lot, watching for pursuit. He doesn't say anything about it, but he's glad the kid's got the instinct. Serve him well, if he doesn't decide the SGC will ask more from him than he can afford to give.

The rest of the drive is silent. He picks the first independent motel he sees. Not in Portland proper, but just outside. He's not sure if O'Neill will have Griffith flying out of Portland Air National Guard or if they'll have to detour over to Kingsley in the morning, but either way, at least there are choices.

Two rooms. He leaves Griffith at the door, and tries not to notice the way Griffith isn't meeting his eyes.

Tosses the bag of clothes on the bed, strips out of his jeans and t-shirt, doesn't think about the stains and stiff patches of dried blood and grime. Tosses the clothes in the garbage. Turns on the shower and climbs in. The plumbing here is terrible, and the bathroom is grungy in the way that clean-but-old linoleum and tile gets, and the hot water doesn't go much hotter than mildly tepid. He wouldn't trade it for the luxury of the bathroom in the Hotel California for all the naaquadah in the galaxy.

When the water runs cold, he turns it off. Ties one scratchy towel around his waist and drapes another around his shoulder. He stands in the middle of the room for a long minute, aching and empty, so blank he can't even feel his own breath in his chest.

Just a whole bunch of fucking bits to clean up, and he picks up the motel phone and he dials.

Two rings, hang up. Wait.

Two minutes later the phone rings. He picks it up. Sits down on the edge of the double bed and studies the patterns of dirt on the carpet. "It's me," he says. "Over and done."

A moment of silence, in a day full of conversations consisting of moments of silences, things that will forever remain unsaid. When O'Neill speaks, it's edged and suspicious. "You said next Monday."

He closes his eyes. "Yeah. I lied. For lots of reasons you probably don't want to know."

He remembers, a little, the first phone conversation he ever had with O'Neill, back at the dawn of this strange new life, wondering if that was how he sounded to others. What he can't remember is if he'd been wondering how much of O'Neill he was, or wondering how much of O'Neill he could leave behind, or wondering if he could ever be anything -- anyone -- else. He still doesn't have those answers. Not entirely.

"You --" O'Neill starts. Stops. Catches himself. "I'll assume you were successful."

He bites back *no, I thought I'd just leave for shits and giggles*. He always tells himself he's not going to let his conversations with O'Neill degenerate into petty sniping, and they always do anyway. They're too alike. O'Neill resents him for what he has and hates him for what he knows, feels threatened by all the things he is and does. Not exactly a recipe for easy conversation. "Yeah," he says. Lies back, sideways, across the bed. Weird to have to hold the phone in his hand, to have a cord tethering him down after so many months of being able to speak and be heard. "And no. The situation's neutralized. Primary mission goal all taken care of. Decided not to tell you part of the plan in advance, though."

There's a pause from the other end of the line. It's a dangerous-sounding pause, the kind that's usually followed, not by explosions, but by careful and quiet inquiry. Sure enough, when O'Neill speaks, it's calm and controlled. "And what part would that be?"

*Want you out of there before you finish going native on me*, O'Neill had said, the first time they'd spoken, months before. Undercover's a fucking bitch. Always has been. You have to be so careful that you don't lose track of who's underneath all those masks. And he hadn't said anything at the time, because for all he respects and resents O'Neill simultaneously, the poor bastard's never tried to see it from the other side of the Great Divide. His entire *life* is undercover, and will be until the end of days. Jack O'Neill went undercover as JD Nielson, who went undercover as Jack O'Neill, who went undercover as Ba'al's First Prime and chief catamite, and right now he has *no fucking clue* which parts are his truth.

O'Neill doesn't know either. He can tell. O'Neill thinks he's not going to like whatever comes next, and O'Neill is right. He can only hope that O'Neill can see the logic when it's presented to him.

No way to get through this without explosions. He doesn't even try. "I lied to you," he says. "I didn't take out all of them. There's one left, and I committed you to a mutual non-aggression pact."

He pauses for a beat, hears the indrawn breath that presages snarling, goes on. Realizes he's been having this conversation in his head for months, down in the dark places where he couldn't let himself overhear, bracing himself for the fallout. "Hear me out. I told you about my contact. You asked how I could trust a snake. Here's how: it was the only way. Point the first, I couldn't guarantee for sure that I'd get all of them. This way, we have the one who's against all the others, the one who'll do our dirty work for us. Point the second, if one of the other snakes left out there decides it wants to take over, we'll have an ally. And yeah, before you say anything, I know the argument about how it's better to have a whole bunch of them fighting each other than one of them concentrating on us,

and I know you think it's bullshit, just like I do."

Deep breath. O'Neill still hasn't said anything. He opens his eyes again, stares at the ceiling tiles. "Point the third, the cleanup on a job like that -- if you wanted it totally undetectable the way you said you did -- would be massive. And you'd get leaks. Lots of them. You people still haven't recovered from Colson, and this would make that look like a walk in the fucking park. Point the fourth, there are a fuck of a lot of people -- human people, not snakes -- who know a fuck of a lot about what's really happening, and any one of them could have put two and two together and decided to start a jihad against you people. Against me. You might be able to protect yourself from it. I'm not going to gamble my life and the lives of a lot of other people on it. This way, the snake can control them and keep them off your back."

The longer he talks, the more time O'Neill will have to calm down. Which is good, because he's about to get to the reason O'Neill is going to like the least. "And point the fifth, I couldn't have done this without the snake's cooperation, and you don't rat out allies."

He finishes talking and waits. O'Neill knows the silence trick, too. Doesn't fall for it. The dead air on the line hisses and snaps; no other noise. It's so fucking *odd* to have the sound in his ears and not at the base of his skull anymore. He knows O'Neill's running down the facts and situations, examining it from every angle, poking and prodding at the reasoning. The silence is a good sign; it means O'Neill's actually thinking, instead of just reacting. It surprises him. He of all people knows how many layers deep O'Neill is capable of considering, but he'd expected more of an immediate blowup before O'Neill could get to a point where he could start the thinking process. Personal shit. Old shit. Some scars don't heal.

But maybe DC's been good for teaching O'Neill how to keep his temper, or maybe O'Neill's just as tired, just as broken, as he is. When O'Neill finally does speak, there's anger in his voice. But there's capitulation behind it. "So you're telling me you're basically the snake's whore."

"Did you fucking *miss* the part where that's been true for six months?" he snaps. "You *knew*. Don't tell me you didn't."

Hears himself giving it away, every last piece, in those scant few words. The feel of the snake's hands on his skin. The weeks, months, of lying to everyone he faced. The endless lies he received in return. (Virta. Suzukimo.) Dead people and dying people and all the fucking dreams, the pieces, the memories, losing himself into the dark and the cold, the pieces of his broken vows strewn behind him. The entirety of what he's done is a weight in his stomach, a hand around his throat, and it's all right there for O'Neill to hear.

Doesn't know if O'Neill can hear it. Doesn't know if O'Neill will *let* himself hear it. He has no idea what O'Neill has learned, how much O'Neill has changed, what O'Neill has made himself forget. Once upon a time he (they) had been at the mercy of uniformed old men who'd sent him out to be their hands so their hands would stay clean, and he'd always wondered whether those old men knew what they were asking, and now O'Neill has the answer.

Pity this busy monster, manunkind. (Not.) Because he's spent the past six months taking himself back to the days when he was O'Neill, turning back, undoing, unmaking. Daylight Saving the World Time, set your clock back thirty years; a memory of a memory, a ghost of a ghost. Progress is a comfortable disease. He's gone back and O'Neill's gone forward and two roads diverged in a yellow wood and now O'Neill is sitting and hearing the unspoken litany of all his trials, Lord (soon be over) and for the first time, he thinks O'Neill might know down to the last grain what it cost.

"Yeah," O'Neill says. "Yeah. I knew."

It's not an apology. It won't ever be an apology.

He breathes in. Grabs for control. Goes back to his justifications, his defenses, because if he doesn't the cracks will start to widen until the dam breaks and the water comes rushing in, and the river of Jordan is muddy and cold and the river of Lethe empties into the Styx and he can't afford to drink from any of them at all. "All right. Yeah. The goal of this op wasn't to eliminate the snake. It was to eliminate the threat. Which I did. We negotiated a truce. It says it knows that we're going to win in the end. That it's inevitable. That we won't give up as long as there's a threat. And it decided that it's better to be a big fish in a small pond than to be nothing."

Breathe in. Breathe out. Count his heartbeats, too fast and edgy. "And you trust a snake," O'Neill says.

There's no good way to answer that question, except with truth. He lifts a hand, presses its palm against one eye. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah. I do."

Another breath, another few heartbeats, and he realizes he can't leave it there. "I gave terms. It agreed. No fucking with Earth politics. No laundering offworld tech. No snakes on Earth. No Jaffa. No trying to conquer the galaxy at large, either. It says it doesn't want to rule the galaxy anymore anyway. I don't know why I believe it, but fuck me, I do. This one's different. And it could have fucked me running more times than I could count, and it never did. I had to make a call. I made it."

"You didn't have the authority to make a deal like that," O'Neill says, anger no less vicious for all that it's soft and cold. (For destruction ice is also great, and would suffice.)

And yeah. This is the last card he has to play. He's kept it in reserve for a long fucking time, against a day when he'd need to use it, to rescue himself from a bad situation or to save somebody who needed saving. Hadn't ever expected he'd need to use it to keep a *fucking snake* safe, and that thought galls him, because it's not a stunt he can pull twice. O'Neill resents his existence and wishes he'd just *go away* (wishes he'd never been created) but push has long since come to shove and in the end, when the chips fall down, he's always known he can force O'Neill to uphold a covenant he's made.

Trading on borrowed authority, except it's not borrowed at all. It's his. Theirs. O'Neill hates knowing there are others existing under the name O'Neill, under the same shared history -- robot or clone or quantum twin -- for so many reasons, and some of them O'Neill will cop to and some of them O'Neill doesn't even know himself, but the greatest unexamined reason is this: because O'Neill has always feared that someday one of them would try to make promises in that name, and now one of them has, and it's no fucking kindness to spell things out.

He does anyway. "Yes, I did. Your authority," he says, and he feels old, so old. "Because it's what needed to be done. Because it's what you would have done if you weren't blinded by shit you haven't gotten over yet."

Another of those two-minute silences. This one's honed sharp and tinged red. He's never been more glad that Portland and DC are on opposite sides of the country, because he knows that right now, O'Neill would probably reach through the phone and fucking *strangle* him if he could. To O'Neill, the thought of trusting a snake -- any snake, *this* snake -- is revolting. Was to him, too. But greatest good, greatest number, and sometimes you have to fuck some vows in order to save others and sometimes you have to fuck most of them to save the best, and nobody who hasn't been there will ever know.

"I can't fucking believe you," O'Neill finally says. "I just ... can't fucking believe you."

He sighs. "Yeah. I know." He takes a deep breath. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry. Best judgement."

"Road to hell," O'Neill counters, stormclouds gathering, and then they're both catching themselves, regrouping, moving on.

Another cycle of silence. The silences are shifting, changing, each one new and uncertain. When O'Neill finally talks again, it's not the question he was expecting. "Is it the original? Or one of the clones?"

Which one is left, O'Neill means. Gives him pause. And yeah. He knows why O'Neill would care, why O'Neill would want to know. From the moment he first opened his eyes and saw Ba'al smiling at him with acid and knives, the possibility of revenge, of *vengeance*, has been slumbering. Someday. And since the day he went under, since the day he went off the radar and off the grid, the possibility of revenge has been Schrödinger's Kitten to O'Neill, neither alive nor dead. O'Neill had accepted -- however grudgingly -- the necessity that he wouldn't *know* the deed had been done until after the bodies had been buried, had accepted -- however imperfectly -- the knowledge that he wouldn't be able to have the satisfaction of twisting the knife himself. O'Neill had, somehow, come to accept that the action was more important than the hand that did the acting. (The spirit wants only that there be flying; it matters not whose the wings.)

For O'Neill to discover Ba'al had cloned itself would have been bad enough. (No way of knowing, of ever knowing, if all of them had been conquered, if ghost and spectre had finally been put to rest.) To discover that his own clone had made a deal with a devil: unfathomable. With *the devil*: even worse. To know that one survived is enough to keep O'Neill in sleepless nights for years to come, and so O'Neill needs to know which is which, which is worse: knowing that the version of Ba'al that had tortured and killed him, again and again, was dead and gone, even if not by his own hands, or knowing that the original was still alive, *allied*, untouchable, to torment himself with hoping the snake will break the deal someday and permit O'Neill to take his revenge himself.

And he's not above lying to O'Neill to buy the man some peace of mind -- God knows, if anyone deserves it -- but he doesn't know which answer would be the proper coin. Doesn't know which one would be bad and which one would be worse, in the personal hierarchy of O'Neill's pain.

Once upon a time he would have. And then he'd woken up one morning and discovered that he didn't get to be Jack O'Neill anymore and for that price he'd purchased the liberty of not having to be Jack O'Neill again, but he couldn't have done this job, this mission, without the lessons he'd made himself forget and Jack O'Neill knows more thoroughly than he knows his own name. So he's bought himself a little piece of memory and paid for it with having to remember -- *come buy, come buy*, goblin pulp and goblin dew - - and the other guy had never known: that he'd built himself a self entire, that he'd turned his back on it to come back to being O'Neill's hands and O'Neill's history.

All O'Neill can see is that he's done something O'Neill wouldn't ever have done himself. (Trust a snake. Make a deal. Bow to the compromise.) O'Neill can't see all the pieces of their shared past that led him there. Maybe he can't see them either. He doesn't know; he can't tell.

So he says, "I don't know." And O'Neill makes a tiny noise -- frustration, disappointment, anger, maybe even fear. It's not even a lie. He knows what Delta told him -- what Ba'al told him -- and he knows the snake is no more above lying to him than he was above lying to the snake. He *doesn't* know.

Suspects. But suspicion isn't proof.

"Go home," O'Neill finally says. Flat and affectless. "Go home and let me figure out how the fuck to spin this to the appropriate parties."

"You'll think of something," he says. "You always do."

O'Neill snorts. "Yeah. Thanks for the vote of confidence. Go *home*. Your part's over. I've got a fuckload of cleaning up after you to do."

Truth. And a wretched one. He'd been hoping (hidden way down in the parts of him he hadn't ever let see the sunlight) that he'd be able to wrap it all up, hand it to O'Neill on a silver platter, say *here you go, I fixed it*. And he couldn't. At best he's given O'Neill a respite and at worst he's given O'Neill a whole fucking mess, and fuck it, he'd wanted to do so much more. Had wanted to set O'Neill *free*.

O'Neill had let him go. O'Neill had let him live, let him escape his minders and his watchers. A single moment, a shared glance, sitting in his/their truck in the parking lot of a high school with heedless children milling around them, and O'Neill's eyes had said *I know what you're going to do. I'm not going to stop you. Don't fuck it up for me*. And he's been trying so fucking *hard*, ever since that moment, to steer the tightrope between repaying that trust and living his own life, and he's succeeded in some ways and failed utterly in others, and there's a part of him that had been hoping to balance the books.

This conversation, this whole fucking miserable mess of a conversation, should have been a triumph. *Mission accomplished*. And the mission's accomplished, as much as it could be, and he's asking to be relieved and O'Neill is telling him that he is, and he's not handing O'Neill a victory, he's handing O'Neill more months and years of misery.

His turn to be silent, now. Because he can't leave it like this, not for good. And he's pretty sure that once they hang up this phone, it'll be for good. O'Neill never wanted to cop to his existence in the first place, and seeing the life he's made for himself makes O'Neill ache for all the might-have-beens, and the life O'Neill is releasing him to is a life O'Neill can never have, not while he considers himself still bound by duty and obligation. And he's just made O'Neill's duty and obligation worse.

They're both walking away from this one with fresh scars. Wounded each other again, mutual savagery: O'Neill called on him to go take care of Ba'al, knowing what it would cost him, and he called on O'Neill to accept the solution he'd found, knowing how much it would rend. But O'Neill could still call him and know he'd answer, and he could still return and know O'Neill would (eventually, grudgingly) accept. Mutual obligation.

And the burden of having to acknowledge the debts paid to the obligations, and in their profession, obligations are both weapons to wield and traps to circumnavigate, and that's why he'll never call again. The price of having people to call on is knowing that there are people who can call on you. The price of having people owe you favors is owing favors in return. There's a debt he will never, never be able to pay -- the debt of his freedom, the debt of his *life* -- and O'Neill can still call in that marker and he won't say no. But he knows O'Neill will never allow it to happen again.

Once they hang up this phone, it'll be for good. Formal debrief, on a conference call with others who are in the know: yeah. Visit to DC, make the final reports face-to-face, with others present: possibly. Messages carried through intermediaries down the years, never going so far as to be a direct relay but just enough so that they both *know* the road-not-taken: maybe. But this is his last chance to get O'Neill one-on-one, in a context where he can say the things that other people shouldn't overhear.

There are a lot of things he should say. He doesn't think O'Neill would be willing to hear most of them. His turn for silence, as he works it all through, and finally he settles on: "Thanks."

He can hear O'Neill sucking in air, and knows O'Neill hears it as more than *sir, I stand relieved*. "For?" O'Neill asks. Voice wary.

He's quiet again. Can't find the words. Spent so long trying to learn them, for all the times when it matters, and now he's back to where he fucking started. "Everything," he finally says. "Giving me this. I know what it costs you. I just wanted you to know that I know."

It's *important* that O'Neill knows. That O'Neill knows he remembers all the layers of pain and sacrifice his new life is built on. O'Neill didn't make him. He made himself. But O'Neill made it possible, and for that fact, he is truly grateful.

He's not sure what he's expecting. To be laughed at, maybe. To be brushed off. What he gets is silence again, but it's thoughtful silence. Considering silence. Like O'Neill has heard the *click* of the conversation shifting to the personal, and is considering what contribution he wants to add.

"You're welcome," O'Neill finally says. "And --" Another pause. He waits. He's said his final words; it's only fitting that O'Neill get the chance as well. And sure enough, the words are slow, dragged out over the blockade of years of not-speaking, but they eventually come. "It might be better than -- than you remember. I was fucking furious that you talked to Carter. But ... whatever you said, we're ... we're okay."

He doesn't ask what O'Neill means by 'okay'. Wants to. Doesn't. Knows O'Neill won't tell him. He'd loved Sam Carter (not the same way he'd loved Daniel, but no two loves can be the same, not in kind or in degree) and he'd always thought it couldn't possibly work between them, for oh so many reasons. And looking back at that list of reasons now, with what he knows (now) to be possible to achieve with just a little bit (a whole fucking lot) of effort, he thinks most of those reasons are surmountable. Gave Carter the nudge. Up to them both what they do with it.

"I hope it works," he says. One last gift. One last benediction. Couldn't give O'Neill freedom, but could give him the chance for a modicum of peace.

More silence. The calm of a conversation drawing to a close; the sound of two men who understand each other, both intimately and not at all. An ending. An understanding. *Frater, ave atque vale*; having come (*O brother!*) to these melancholy rites, they will never stand here again.

But all moments draw to a close. Eventually, he stirs again. Stands up and paces back and forth in the few scant feet of clear space this shitty motel room offers him to pace in while he's still tethered by the phone's cord. "I'll call you tomorrow with the full, official debrief," he says. Back to pretending that he's okay. "On the record. Right now, I want to get twelve hours of sleep, a meal, and then another twelve hours of sleep. Tell me how you want me to send Griffith back to you. You'll need him. He's solid."

O'Neill clears his throat. In it, he can hear the sound a door shutting, never to be re-opened. "Portland's probably the best shot," O'Neill says. "Easiest for you. I'll call the base commander and get a flight put on standby. Say -- fifteen hundred tomorrow?"

"Yeah," he says. He stares, blankly, at the cinderblock wall. "Sounds good."

"Probably best if you don't come along," O'Neill says. "Unless you --"

"No," he says. "No, you're right. I'm going to ... I've got some shit to do. To deal with. Hard landing. You know. I need a couple of weeks." As he says it, he knows it's true, knows it's truth, and he can feel the quiver of all the things he's been staving off shifting and muttering in the back of his mind. He shoves it out of the way. Almost there. Almost through. "I'll call you tomorrow. Write up the report as soon as I can. Then I need to take some time. I'll take care of my own travel, though. You don't have to worry there."

"Okay," O'Neill says. "Yeah." Another moment of silence. This one more awkward. "If you run into any trouble --"

"Yeah," he says. "I'll call."

He won't. They both know it. They're done now, for good or for ill. Old ghosts laid to rest, at last and after far too long. A relief.

He doesn't wait to hear what else O'Neill might say. He just hangs up the phone, so carefully he can feel the precise instant where the receiver cuts the connection between them, and across the country, he knows the dial tone is singing in O'Neill's ear.

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Stand up. Stand down. Over and done for. (Not.)

Hundred things he should be doing. Checking in on Griffith, if Griffith's not asleep. Rummaging through his pockets, pulling out all the bits and pieces and scraps and detritus of someone else's life. Starting in on the report he owes O'Neill, because the debrief will go better if O'Neill has all the facts and explanations at hand. Getting something to eat before the fast-food joint across the highway stacks the chairs on the tables for the night. *Sleeping*.

He stands in the precise center of the room, staring at nothing.

Six months. Of a life on pause, of a sleep and a forgetting, and at the end of all his exploring he's arrived where he started (the second time) and he gets to do it all again. Retracing his steps. His war is over, down by the riverside, over and done, and come rain or hail or wind or snow he's not going out to Flanders-o. Time to go home to the home he's been forcing himself to forget and figure out what's left inside his head that he can call his own.

The mind is a computer, with neurons instead of circuits, and he's been programming his the entire way, and he has no idea what the fuck lies underneath.

And Mitchell is waiting for him, Mitchell has been waiting for him (*Mitchell, Mitchell*, oh, God, *Mitchell*) and he can finally think that now, he can *let* himself think that now, let himself conjure the smell of Mitchell's skin and the weight of Mitchell's hands and the warmth of Mitchell's body, leaning over him, touching him, bearing him down, a rock on his chest and a weight in his stomach and the crawling of his skin and --

Down on the filthy carpet, the towel coming unknotted beneath him, and he fumbles for *kekka fuza* and his legs won't do what he wants them to do, and there are monsters in his memory and six months' weight of horror and destruction in the back of his throat. Six months of being the snake's whore, and he doesn't know, he can't tell, if he'll take one look at Mitchell reaching out for him and flinch away before he knows what he's even doing.



*Fuck.*

He bends over on the floor, folded double. Stretches his legs out in front of him. Puts his forehead on his knees, wraps his hands around his ankles, half defense, half retreat. *Breathe.*

Once upon a time he'd tried to live in two separate worlds, commuting from home life to horror and back again even long before the days when his commute was measured in light-years instead of continents. And he'd lost Sara for it (lost Carter lost Daniel lost everyone he'd ever thought he could have loved) when he'd tried to draw the lines, tried so hard to keep things in their own neat boxes, because you can't draw those lines and expect them to hold.

The world doesn't fit into there and here. You are always your actions. You are always your own consequence.

And he'd learned his lessons and made his promises and his peace, and for his hope and his reward he'd found everything he never thought he'd have and hold -- Mitchell, *Mitchell*, his constancy, the rock upon which he has built his joy. Their life together is terrifying and thrilling, light against the darkness, a foundation of truth and a frame of wisdom. They've built it together. Their hands will keep tending it until their ends of days.

He could bring these pieces of him home to Mitchell -- what he's done, what he's allowed, what he's embraced, what choices he's made -- and Mitchell would hold them, Mitchell would bear them up and carry them for him until he could bear to carry them himself. He knows Mitchell would. And it would take months -- *years* -- for him, for them, to undo the damage it would cause. Old ghosts. Old habits. Old patterns. Failures and faults.

You don't do that to the person you love. You don't do that to the person who loves you. *He* won't do that to the person he loves. He's been bleeding out for months and he's field-patched the wounds and he owes Mitchell, he fucking *owes* Mitchell, the strength and the grace to fucking *face his shit* before he drags them both under.

Time to hack the inside of his head again. He's lucky. He knows someone who has the user's manual. The monks had taken him in, taught him his differentials and his integration, and then Keller-*roshi* sent him forth to learn how to measure the world and had told him he would always be welcome there, and it won't be the first time he's shown up on someone's door uninvited.

He will by God go home to Mitchell as *himself*.

And hey. Journey's never as bad the second time around.

*Breathe.*

Hundred things he should be doing. Hundred things he *could* be doing. But he stands up from where he was sitting on the floor, barefoot, naked, and he picks up the receiver and he makes himself dial the numbers: now, like this, before he changes his mind.

Mitchell answers on the third ring. "Lo?" His voice sounds ragged, like he's been sleeping, and it's sharp with annoyance -- at being woken, at being disturbed, at the stab of panic that always comes from the phone call in the middle of the night -- and oh, *God*, breathe, *breathe*.

"Hey," he says, finally, when he trusts himself to be able to speak. "It's JD."

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