

## **a valley of dry bones**

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# a valley of dry bones

by [synecdochic](#)

## Summary

Cam's always been good at facing facts, except when those facts have to deal with the things he doesn't want to admit, even to himself.

## Notes

(Originally [posted](#) 2007-03-02.)

I tried writing this before I wrote "Like Water, Lying", to make that one make sense, and it kept falling apart, and I couldn't figure out why. So I put it away, and I wrote that story instead, and then I poked around some other corners of the Eurydiceverse, and then I came back to this one and wrote the first half and then got distracted. It was on my WIP list as "Suspended Animation" before ivorygates made the observation that made it get retitled: *and he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord GOD, thou knowest.*

So, if you're just tuning in: welcome to the Eurydiceverse, the accidental series where everyone's just a little more fucked up than they really are, or perhaps are about as fucked up as they should, by all rights, be. Takes place about two/three weeks after Depth Charge, and a nebulous six months before Like Water, Lying, and immediately after 9x18, "Arthur's Mantle".

slashfic25 prompt #5: *school*.

## **sunday (late)**

They're all just getting ready to leave the infirmary -- nothing serious, *really*, just bumps and scrapes and Cam's gonna be favoring that knee for a few days -- when Jackson says -- first words since they 'gated back, first words all fucking day that didn't have to do with the mission -- "You were a pilot for a very long time, weren't you."

It's a statement, not a question. Cam's in a pretty bad mood for being in such a good mood, or maybe a pretty good mood for being in such a bad mood, so maybe there's a little extra snap in his voice when he says, "Yeah, and?" Because they know his record. They all know his record, and know where it helped them and where it hurt him and he tries like hell not to think about all the bodies SG-1 leaves lying in its wake and where the hell did that thought come from, anyway?

Sam's standing at the door, turned back to wait for them. Cam can't read her face, and that's a kick in the pants to realize. When he'd gotten here, once he'd gotten them all back together, he'd have put money on the fact that she'd be his guide to this crazy-ass rabbit hole he'd fallen down. It was one of the reasons he'd wanted her back so badly. But there's nothing in her expression but exhaustion and a little bit of irritation, and that doesn't do a damn thing to help explain why Jackson's frowning at him like the stormclouds are rolling in.

"I was just wondering," Jackson says, and finishes lacing up his shoes.

Jackson doesn't "just wonder" things. Cam's a little tired and a little sore and more than a little *fucking pissed* at himself for having been shoved into another dimension and nearly blown up from his own stupidity (and no amount of insisting to himself that it would have turned out the same way if any of the *rest* of them had tried it can make him get over the nagging voice in the back of his head that keeps calling him a fucking idiot). "And why," he asks, as neatly and precisely as he can, "were you wondering that?"

Jackson shrugs. "Just trying to make it make sense, is all." He waits half a beat, just enough so Cam's ready to open his mouth and ask, before adding, "Why you keep putting yourself and the rest of us in danger. It's for the adrenaline rush. You must miss it."

The nurse who was doing their checkups isn't listening to them. The nurse doing their checkups is *scrupulously* not listening to them. Cam flicks his eyes to Sam, who's leaning against the side of the doorway. To Teal'c, who's most carefully not meeting anyone's eye.

Jackson can't think that. Cam hasn't been doing that. This is *normal* for around here.

Isn't it?

He doesn't have time to decide whether to be annoyed or upset or just plain shocked, because Jackson's already sliding off the infirmary bed and turning to Sam. "We drained the rest of the power from Merlin's device getting us back into this dimension, didn't we?" Sam nods, and Jackson sighs. "Then I'd better get down to my office and write down everything I remember

before I lose it. And then I guess we're off to that Gate address we found to check it out and see if there's anything left."

Sometimes Cam wonders who Jackson thinks is in command of SG-1. Sometimes he doesn't have to wonder. This is one of the times when he doesn't. At least Teal'c remembers to incline his head in Cam's direction -- Cam can't put his finger on what it means; he's still indexing all of Teal'c's varied bows, because he knows damn well each one has a very specific context, but he's pretty sure you have to be Jaffa to understand -- before leaving him alone with the nurses.

And with a sneaking, desperate suspicion. Because neither Sam nor Teal'c had objected to Jackson's statement, and they're both the kinds of people who would speak up if they thought Jackson was wrong. Hell, he's heard Sam call bullshit on people more times than he could count, and it's not like Teal'c is any kind of shrinking violet. Which means -- because they didn't object, because they couldn't even *look* at him, because nobody spoke up and said "hey, Daniel, isn't that just a little bit unfair --"

His whole *team* thinks he's trying to get them killed.

*Shit.*

### **sunday (later)**

He's not quite sure how he gets himself home -- everything from infirmary to front door is a little bit fuzzy, like he's on autopilot the whole way -- and he's out of beer when he gets there, which is a bad fucking start to an extended session of navel-gazing. He sits himself down on the couch anyway, doesn't bother turning on the TV. Just bends over and puts his elbows on his thighs, lets his hands dangle free between his knees. Something tucked down in his chest is still numb, and he wishes he had the booze to reach it.

*His team thinks he's trying to get them killed.* Or get himself killed, really, and they'll just be collateral damage, but collateral damage makes you just as dead as you would be otherwise, even if dead is sometimes a relative term around here. And it's fucking ridiculous. Cam misses the sky, misses it more than he can stand some days, but life at the SGC, life on the front lines, is enough of a rush for anyone. Hell, five hours ago he'd faced down a Sodan warrior with rabies --

-- and felt *good* while doing it, felt like he was being *useful*, felt like he was needed and useful and *alive* --

-- and there's a little voice in the back of his head saying: *yeah, he's got you nailed, you miss being the Golden Boy, don't you?*

He tells it to shut up. But it's as stubborn as he is, pulling moment after moment out of his memory of the last year and throwing it in his face: the Gamma site, Khalek, dive-bombing a satellite and trying not to think of all the good men and women who were already dead. Inches away from death each time, and coming out of it every single fucking time itchy and

edgy and feeling like you feel when you walk away unscratched from the landing that should have killed you.

*You had one of those, that voice is telling him. Took you a while before you could walk away. Sure as hell was a rush right up until then, though, wasn't it?*

It's creepy how the little voice in the back of his head sounds exactly like Jackson in a pissy mood.

Cam overheard someone once -- a long time ago, in another country, and by now, the guy's long dead -- say, "Mitchell? Yeah, good guy, I'd have him at my back any day." And they'd been in the middle of a war, where that *meant* something, and he's been carrying that snip of conversation around in his head ever since, because that's who he wants to be. That's who he's always thought he was. Every tour he's ever served, he's always been the one people lean on, and the one people confess to, and the one people go to when they can't think of anything else to do. It's what he's been trying to do for the rest of the SGC (for the rest of SG-1), and sure, he's been struggling like hell while doing it, but he's been telling himself it's because none of the people he works with now is anything even close to normal anymore.

So. His team thinks he's a danger. Not too much of a danger, obviously, since he's still alive, and he doesn't doubt for a second that SG-1 would have a lick of difficulty turfing a commander they didn't trust, even if it was just by being a subconscious hair too slow in coming to the rescue -- but enough that Jackson said something. And, academic lectures aside, Jackson doesn't talk just to hear the sound of his own voice. Which means it's enough to be a problem.

And even if Jackson has a point, Cam's not quite ready to cop to it -- not without some bourbon and a hell of a lot more spare time for pulling out his soul and staring at it. But Cam understands wartime. The way it works in war is that you walk straight up to the gates of hell and the thing that keeps you going is that you know the guy on your left side and the guy on your right side are just as fucking scared as you are but they've got your back and you've got theirs. He knew from the minute he walked in here that the SGC was on wartime footing, and apparently they feel like he hasn't been living up to his end of the bargain. Whether or not *he* thinks he has doesn't mean anything; they're the ones who have to decide. And apparently they have.

It stings. No, fuck that -- it *tears*, leaves him raw and aching in a way he hasn't been for a hell of a long time, makes him want to turn in his commission and admit to everyone who sees him fall that he doesn't have what it takes after all. They'd warned him, at the beginning, in all the orientation briefings. The SGC has a seventy-percent turnover in the first twenty-four months of duty. Half the washouts just flat out can't cope, and the other half die trying to prove to themselves that they can. He'd listened to the figures and told himself that for his whole life, he's always been part of the other thirty percent.

But then again, Jackson had warned him. And Jackson doesn't talk just to hear the sound of his own voice, which means that somewhere, somehow, Jackson thinks he needs to be aware of the problem -- why? Does Jackson want him to go away? To step aside for someone Jackson thinks more worthy? To, God help him, doubt himself so much that he ducks too

slowly or turns just a fraction of a second too late and SG-1 gets to close ranks and go back to the way they used to be?

He doesn't want to think that of Jackson. For a lot of reasons, but mostly because it doesn't match what he knows of the man. Jackson's subtle and hard to read, all right, and he's about as comforting as a box of spikes landing on your toe, but Cam's never once seen him be that outright ruthless to someone who wasn't an active danger. (*But he thinks you're a danger*, Cam's little voice tells him, and he stops himself, because that way lies madness and if that's the case he might as well just bend over and kiss his own ass good-bye.) And Jackson *had* warned him, which means -- what?

If not out of malice -- and Cam refuses to believe it's out of malice, because Jackson's a lot of things but above all else he's *fair*, even if it's only by the rules he's built in his own head -- then it must mean that Jackson thinks there's something there worth warning. Thinks that Cam is possessed of enough intelligence to recognize it as a warning, and enough awareness to be able to recognize its truth, and enough value to be worth warning in the first place, rather than just being written off wholesale.

It's around twenty-three thirty when he finally stirs again, and his stomach reminds him that he hasn't eaten yet. He ignores it and picks up his cell phone. It's late, but none of them ever gets enough sleep and this is the least clock-bound duty he's ever been assigned. Sam picks up before the first ring's even finished, as though she was expecting the call.

"Yeah?" she says, bright and alert.

"You think I'm salvagable?" he asks, not bothering to identify himself, not bothering to explain what he means. She'll know. She always has. There's a murmur in the background, barely audible over the tinny cell phone connection, and Cam tells himself it's just that she has the TV on.

She only hesitates for a second. If Cam hadn't been listening for it, he wouldn't have even noticed. "If I didn't, I wouldn't have come back."

"Right," he says -- it's a comfort, really, even if it's not the kind of comfort she can usually give him -- and hangs up the phone. It isn't until later, when he's lying in his bed and watching the headlights from the street play out over the ceiling with every passing car, that he thinks to wonder whether the question she was answering was the same question he'd asked.

## **monday**

Morning doesn't bring him anything but a hangover, which he thinks is supremely unfair, as he didn't have a drop to drink. Could have benefited from it, but one thing he's learned so far about this job is that it leads to empty refrigerators and bare pantries. (And even when it doesn't, when he begs or borrows or steals the time to go to the store and actually buy things, he has to throw out half the stuff that's rotted in the fridge when he comes home from being unexpectedly stuck on-base or off-world or *in another fucking dimension*.) Insult to injury,

he's out of coffee, too. He thinks about stopping for a cup, but he's getting a little tired of the guards at the security checkpoint ribbing him for insisting that Dunkin' Donuts coffee is far superior to Starbucks, and he doesn't feel like fighting the next round.

Usually he'd go for Jackson's secret stash if he didn't feel like stopping, but after last night, somehow he thinks Jackson isn't necessarily going to want to share. Probably best to leave the man alone, give him some time to calm down; Jackson hadn't been *angry*, not precisely, but he'd been annoyed, and Jackson annoyed is Jackson best avoided.

Except once Cam gets signed in, gets changed, and gets settled, Jackson breezes by like it's any damn morning ever and drops a stack of paper on his desk. "The translation of what we remembered from Merlin's device," Jackson says, and then proceeds to tell Cam everything that's in the folder anyway. He's got an oversized travel mug in his other hand, and the aroma of his special blend wafts from it as he gestures, and the smell of it drives Cam nuts, but not as nuts as the dichotomy between Jackson last night and Jackson tonight. This is Lecture Voice, the one Jackson uses when he's standing in front of a PowerPoint slideshow with a pointer in his hand. And Cam always likes listening to Jackson -- never fails to learn at least *something* -- but compared to what he'd been fearing, he's never before been more grateful for Professor Jackson making an appearance.

He's so grateful that he lets the lecture go on for longer than he might otherwise, and Jackson's apparently in an impish mood this morning, because he ends up with "--supposedly matches the text of an English poem no longer extant, and if you're going to use the memory of this lecture to lull you off to sleep tonight I'd be happy to tape-record it for you, since that's the only possible explanation I can think of for why you're still listening."

He seems happy about something, Cam thinks, or at least *easy* about something, and there are a bunch of things it could be and none of them are good news. "I'm sleeping just fine," he says. "And I'm listening. Malory. *Morte d'Arthur*. Merlin. Geoffrey of Monmouth and Merlin Ambrosius. Keep going."

Jackson pushes up his glasses and smiles. It's not a smirk, not quite, which surprises Cam. Jackson hasn't been smiling much lately. "Before coffee, even; I'm impressed."

Sometimes Cam thinks there are two men living under Jackson's skin, Professor Jackson and the Jackson who'll wield anything he can get his hands on as a weapon. He wonders whether both of them have always been there, or whether one or both of them came from the job. He wonders what kind of person he'll find himself sharing skin with when he's been doing this for half as long as Jackson has.

If he gets there. He's through eleven of his twenty-four months, thirteen left to go, and all of a sudden he feels like they're clueing him in for the midterm review.

"Coffee sounds like a good idea," Cam says, because it *does*, and because if Jackson's going to pretend nothing's wrong between them, he can too. He pushes back his chair. "Anything I need to know about going on today?"

He's expecting a *not really*, which is the answer he always gets -- the other three members of his team all have duties that don't involve being on SG-1, and they've never really been

inclined to keep him briefed on what's going down -- but Jackson surprises him again. "I'm briefing SG-9 at 1100 before they head off to '992, Sam's got lab time scheduled in the afternoon -- she managed to trade with Bill Lee for a crack at the high-test naquadah generators, and she's hoping she can interface them with Merlin's device -- and I think Teal'c's going to be wiping the floor with new recruits for most of the day down at the gym. General Landry wants to see us at 1430 for followup and we're still on for P75-18Y tomorrow morning unless we get something concrete out of that --" He gestures at the file folder. "--to change our plans."

Jackson's being helpful. Gregarious. Friendly. Thrifty, brave, courteous, reverent, a regular fucking Boy Scout this morning, and it's creeping Cam out beyond all words.

He wonders if this is another cue. If Jackson's giving him hints, oblique and implicit, about what the commander of SG-1 is supposed to be doing. Is this the carrot, and yesterday was the stick? Is he supposed to see this, this easy familiarity, and want to be a part of it?

Or -- no, he knows this ease; it's the way Jackson had seemed so relaxed in his own skin after Cam had finished fucking him through the bed, or trying to at least. Did Jackson just scratch an itch last night after they'd all gone home, and he's still in a good mood from it?

They haven't talked about it. Cam hasn't even *thought* about it, not really -- not more than every *other* time he sees Jackson with a pen in his mouth, hands moving over some artifact or another, tongue lingering over the weight and shape of some language Cam will never be able to speak. Cam knows the rules, and he's pretty sure Jackson does, too; the guy's been working with the military for a long time. It's been like nothing happened. Nothing at all. Jackson hasn't even *acknowledged* it. Not a sideways glance, not a moment where his gaze lingers too closely, not a flick of eyes from lips down to crotch and back up again.

Cam knows the rules. You don't do that. You don't bring these things up in the middle of the working day. You don't say anything overt, anything that can be overheard, anything that someone can point at and use for proof. You send your signals with the subtlest of subtle cues, by look and inflection, and if they get picked up, you're lucky, and if they don't, well, no harm no foul. But. Still. It'd be nice to at least be able to think he'd been okay enough at it for Jackson to want to do it again.

Cam manages to make it through the whole morning -- coffee, Danish, reports, infirmary followup, check-in with Sam, monthly visit with the nice brainsuckers down in the Psych department (and oh, *that's* fun, always is, really, but he's been entertaining himself by trying to convince Dr. Pierelli that he's finding emotional and spiritual strength in old 70s Britcoms, and he's got a private bet with himself about how long it'll take her to cotton on). He stops down at Supply, changes his mission requisition field-kit list to include a sewing kit, earplugs, pliers, glowsticks, and a mirror. They all get the standard equipment by default, but Gate teams have always been encouraged to carry discretionary items, and the monthly informal Base newsletter always includes a bunch of good stories about how that one thing someone happened to have shoved in the bottom of their pack saved everyone's ass. After a few minutes, he says *fuck it* and asks the quartermaster to throw in a handful of tampons, two spare ampoules of tretinoin, and a strip of Jackson's allergy drugs as well; can't hurt.



He'd been meaning to get back down to Sam's lab, see if there was anything he could do to help her, or at least make sure she'd gotten *some* nutrition that wasn't in the caffeine family, but around 1130 there's a water main break down on 22; turns out the gizmo the tech boys have been fooling around with *is* Ancient, and apparently one of the new guys is just back from Atlantis and has the ATA gene, and when he turned it on it blew a hole in the wall the size of a quarter, straight through one of the junction pipes. It's one of the all-available-hands types of disasters, which means that Cam shows up for the briefing damp, covered in grease, and in the best possible mood for having to face a bunch of people who've apparently decided he's a danger to himself and others.

Except nothing happens. Cam's spent the morning subconsciously dreading having to look them in the eye -- not that anything's changed about the way they think about him, at least he doesn't *think* it has, but now he's finally been *clued in* to it -- but it's the same as every damn briefing ever. Teal'c is quiet, Sam's pretending that she isn't distracted, Jackson's alternating between excited infodump and million-miles-away, Landry's grumpy, and Cam is *really* starting to wonder if sometime overnight he got shunted into some kind of alternate universe where everyone around him *isn't* as fucked up as ten miles of bad road.

He goes home. Stops at the stop'n'rob on his way, picks up bread and milk and eggs and Pop-Tarts and toilet paper. And beer. He stows the bread and the milk and the beer in the fridge, drops the toilet paper off in the bathroom, and eats the Pop-Tarts for dinner. Later that night -- lying on his couch with the remote in one hand and the other hand down his shorts, pressing the base of his palm against the line where his dick shades into his balls and stroking gradually upwards, trying to decide if he's hungry or horny or just plain *tired* -- he thinks not of his usual well-thumbed mental scrapbook of pornography but about flying, and about the crazy chest-thump of his heart pumping blood through his veins to let him keep running for his life, and about that one minute in between getting shot and the pain kicking in when your perception of the world just cracks and crystallizes.

It takes him longer than he'd expected to work up to being able to really get into it. One minute it's like his brain's turned on and his body's having nothing of it, and the next, his body's ready to go and his brain's left cold. It's driving him fucking nuts; he's never had problems getting off before, not in his entire fucking life, and now he's slipping mental gears left and right and stuck in the valley between turned on and pissed off for so long that he winds up wondering if it's even worth it.

When he finally comes, his dick raw and aching from all the abuse, it's from remembering the weight of Jackson's cock in his mouth, the way it felt to be on his knees. Afterwards, he feels empty. Spent. Irritated, really: at himself, at Jackson for refusing to stay in the little mental box Cam keeps trying to put him in, at the entire fucking universe. He turns off the TV, washes his hands, and makes sure the front door's locked and all the lights are off before he goes to sleep. His apartment's never seemed so quiet and soulless before; he thinks, not for the first time, that he wishes he was home often enough to get a dog or something. Anything to give the place a little personality.

**tuesday**

They go to P75-18Y. Nothing happens.

Cam tries to tell himself he's not disappointed.

### **saturday (team night)**

It's Cam's turn this week to host -- well, they really only switch back and forth between him and Sam, since Teal'c lives on base and the point of Team Night is to get them the hell *off* base and give them all some semblance of a social life, and Jackson -- who's finally given up, admitted he's sticking around, and gotten his own place -- says he's too covered in boxes to have company. Cam thinks that's pretty much bullshit, but he's not one of the ones entitled to protest, so he lets it go.

His little one-bedroom apartment is too small for four people, especially when one of them is Teal'c, but the rest of the team doesn't seem to mind. Jackson lets Sam have the couch next to Cam, sits himself down on the floor with a beer in one hand and leans against Sam's knees. She reaches out and tucks the tag back in his t-shirt for him -- a quick touch, familiar -- then rubs her fingers into the muscles along the length of his neck, roughly. Jackson makes a little unintelligible noise and drops his head back to look up at her, flashing her a grin.

Cam gets up to do the dishes, because he's seen this movie before -- it was Sam's turn to pick -- and not at all because the way Sam's touching Jackson is stirring something ugly in the pit of his stomach. He doesn't own her. She's a friend. A good friend, an *important* friend, but if she wants to be playing patty cake with Jackson (the two of them are about as subtle as a trainwreck, and it is *none of his fucking business* what the two of them are doing) he's in no place to say anything.

Teal'c and Sam take off when the movie's over, but Jackson doesn't move, not even to see them out; he stays put on the floor, leaning his arm back against the empty couch, still sipping from the same beer he's been nursing all night. Cam could ask why Jackson stayed, could ask what Jackson's got in mind, but instead he heads for the kitchen with the second round of dishes and bottles. "You want another?" he asks, nodding to the bottle in Jackson's hand.

"No, thank you," Jackson says. Cam made a special trip to the liquor store between work and party, bought this stuff specifically for Jackson, whose taste tends to the darks; it's imported from England and it costs an arm and a leg, but Cam's starting to develop a taste for it too. He snags himself another bottle while he's in the kitchen.

The couch is too dangerous, since Jackson seems to have claimed it as his territory, so Cam drops himself on the chair Teal'c had been sitting on. "So," he says, after a minute of silence.

"It really was an abysmal movie, wasn't it?" Jackson asks. "I think we need to change the password to the Netflix account and not let Sam have the new one."

Cam takes a pull of his beer. "I'm staying out of it," he says. "I do not mediate arguments about movie choice or food."

Jackson chuckles. "Probably wise, yes." He looks down at the bottle in his hand, looks up through lashes and lenses. It's a curiously innocent look, one Cam can't remember ever quite seeing from him before. "So. Sam says the two of you have never slept together. Are you not interested in women, or is it just her?"

Jesus *wept*. Cam coughs beer, closes his eyes against the sting in his sinuses. "Now wait a minute --"

"Because it doesn't much matter either way, you know. Teal'c's not from around here, so he doesn't know the cultural standards enough to judge, and in case you haven't noticed, Sam's mellowed out quite a bit since the last time you spent any significant time around her, and -- well, I *am* an anthropologist, and it's not like anything surprises me anymore. I'm not asking to use it against you. I'm simply trying to establish a baseline we can work around." It's the Professor Voice again, and it's like it goes straight down to Cam's dick and it *shouldn't*. "You watch me and Teal'c in the locker room when you think we're not looking. You're still a little nervous around Teal'c, but me, you can convince yourself it's lending a buddy a hand. I'm just not sure if you've put Sam up on a pedestal, thus making her inviolate, or if you're simply not interested in women."

Jackson's watching Cam intently, as though the answer will be written on Cam's face and not in whatever words he can manage to summon up. There's still beer up his nose. Jackson swings his own beer bottle from two fingers and waits.

"It's all right, you know," Jackson says, finally, when Cam doesn't speak. "I'm hardly one to judge."

Once upon a time he'd dismissed Jackson as harmless. Goes to fucking show. "This isn't an appropriate conversation for us to be having," Cam says.

Jackson waves a hand. "Which is an evasion designed to take my attention off the fact that I said something in there that hits you too close to home. I'm curious to know which part of it. It's all *right*. Nobody gives a damn about what we get up to in our spare time. They know better."

Cam closes his eyes and breathes slowly and steadily through his nose. "I'm not comfortable having this conversation with you," he says.

Jackson smiles. Something inside Cam sits up to attention at the look. "Better," he says. "Closer, at least. Unfortunately, I don't really care what you're comfortable with. I'm afraid I need an answer."

He does sound apologetic. Like he regrets putting Cam through this; like he's engaged in a particularly messy bit of research that needs to get done no matter what.

"Mitchell?" Jackson prompts. Like he'll wait for the answer all night.

Cam feels drunk. He's only had three beers over five hours -- four, if you count the one he's holding in his hand -- but he still feels drunk. Jackson's sitting there and staring at him like he's waiting for Cam to confess to wanting to fuck one or two or all of them, and if they

didn't trust him already, what the hell kind of disaster is admitting *that* going to spark, and this is *not the way you do this*. There are *rules*. And sure, Cam breaks the rules -- everyone does, the frat guidelines look good on paper and last about ten fucking minutes when the people who actually care about them turn their backs -- but there are *rules* about breaking the rules. Unwritten, unspoken, but they *exist*, and Rule One of Breaking the Rules involves *not having a fucking conversation about it*.

Jesus. Jackson's supposed to be their *cultural specialist*; does he not fucking *get* the culture he's spent his last ten years living in?

Cam can only guess at how much of an idiot he looks like, gaping and flailing. Jackson sighs and pushes up his glasses with an irritated hand. "All right," he says, finally. "If you're not ready to have this conversation, you're not ready to have this conversation. We'll talk about it later." He puts the beer bottle down on the coffee table, pushes himself to his feet. Cam's brain is on a two-second tape delay, but his momma raised him right, so he's halfway to his feet before Jackson waves a hand. "I can let myself out."

"I never asked to touch her because I didn't think she wanted me to," someone says. When the tape delay catches up to him, Cam realizes it was him.

Jackson pauses as he's pulling on his coat; his smile is softer than it should be. "That's good to know," he says, and his tone gives nothing away. "Sleep well."

Cam doesn't.

## **tuesday**

They go to P3X-R17. Nothing happens.

Cam goes home, drinks the rest of the six-pack of shitty beer nobody touched on Team Night, eats the last slice of cold pizza left over from Sunday night, and jerks off thinking of Marianne MacMillan, the second girl he fucked and the first time he really enjoyed it. Marianne's breasts keep turning into Jackson's dick in his head.

He's starting to consider asking Dr. Lam for some sleeping pills.

## **wednesday**

Sam finally finds time to come over and do something about the rat's nest of cables his electronics system has turned into: three gaming consoles, DVD player, VCR, stereo. Cam stops at the grocery store and picks up ingredients for dinner. He hasn't felt like cooking in weeks, but he's got a reputation to live up to, and they negotiated this bargain a long time ago; she fixes his cars and handles his electronics, and he feeds her and is always on hand to provide emergency laundry advice. His momma always used to joke that he'd make a good wife for some lucky girl someday.

Her noises start puzzled, turn contemplative, and around the time he's frying up the last of the chicken, he hears a triumphant "a-ha" from the living room. She appears ten minutes later dusting off her hands, with a smudge of grey across her cheekbone -- Cam hasn't had time to set up a cleaning service yet, and the insides of open cabinets always collect the most dust. "'Victory is mine', sayeth Samantha," she announces. "The universal remote is on the coffee table."

"Vengeance," he corrects, automatically. "Vengeance is mine."

"Well," she agrees, peaceably, "making me figure out the mess you managed to make of those cables is probably your vengeance for something, yeah. Smells good." She leans one hip up against the counter. "Can I help with something?"

"Set the table," he says. Which she should know; she's been home to his family with him often enough to know that the one who cooks is exempt from table-setting and dish duty, unless one's entertaining guests. And Sam stopped being a guest back in those days when she was lost and miserable and his momma adopted her into the clan.

Sam's not looking lost and miserable anymore. Cam remembers the days after she'd joined the program, the days before he'd been tapped to follow; there had been shadows under her eyes for as long as he could remember, but they'd gotten worse in those days, and he'd spent a long time wondering what deep-space radar telemetry was a cover story for. Now he knows, and the question is no longer what put those shadows in her eyes but why they don't seem to be there anymore.

Cam had been told a rumor once -- before he made it very clear that he wasn't the type of person to listen to gossip -- about Sam and Colonel -- General -- O'Neill. The storyteller had been a little unclear about just what, exactly, had been going on, but the impression Cam took away from it was that it was the SGC's version of the Doomed and Tragic Love Affair That Wasn't. There's apparently good money going around as to whether or not O'Neill and Sam are just waiting a respectable amount of time before announcing the engagement, now that O'Neill's moved on to Homeworld.

He doesn't think it's accurate -- for one thing, she'd have told him; they've been friends for long enough that they don't have many secrets left, and he's been briefed on the ups and downs of every single one of her longer-lasting relationships, usually at two in the morning when something's gone tits-up again. But there's something there, something she hasn't told him, because whenever anyone mentions O'Neill in her hearing there's this little twitch to her jawline, quick and subtle. They never would have done anything, Cam thinks. Not while O'Neill was still at the SGC. The rules are different for men and for women, and whether or not it's fair, it's true; *he* can fuck around if he wants, even though he's pushing well past the point where he's supposed to settle down and at least pretend to be respectable, but *she's* governed by the double standard dictating that women officers are supposed to be pure and chaste. She wouldn't have slept with her CO.

Except *he's* her CO now, at least nominally, and Jackson sure seemed interested enough in whether or not he was interested in sleeping with her.

He's distracted enough in trying to figure out what's going on here, trying to puzzle through all the dynamics of it, that she picks up on it. "Earth to Cam," she says, halfway through dinner. "What planet are you on?"

"Just a little out of it," he answers. And then feels himself blushing, which he knows she'll pick up on, and which makes him blush a little more fiercely, dammit. She quirks one eyebrow, and he drops his eyes and decides to go with the easier of the two personal revelations. "Still thinking about what Jackson said last week."

Jackson said a lot of things last week, but he knows she'll take it as a reference to that conversation in the infirmary, and sure enough, she nods. "I'm not going to give you advice," she says. "I have a feeling Daniel already covered it."

The blush gets stronger -- he can *feel* the heat creeping over his cheeks -- and he wonders, suddenly, what Jackson's told her. Wonders whether or not she knows about that night last month, and that conversation last Saturday, and whether she and Jackson have been laughing about him or not. It makes his voice sharper than it could be. "Jackson's not exactly a font of comfort and stability."

She laughs. "No. No, he's not. But he's better than he could be. Considering."

There's a weight of history in that "considering", and for a second, Cam actually considers. He knows Jackson's history, the part that's been written down at least, and he's gotten bits and pieces of the oral tradition in scraps and echoes through the corridors. Given everything Jackson's been through in the past ten years -- everything they've all been through in the past ten years -- it's a wonder any of them are still sane. Assuming they are sane, that is, which is a pretty fucking huge assumption.

Sam folds her hands together and props her chin on them, studying him carefully. It's a half-second echo of Jackson's butterfly-pinned-to-a-board scrutiny, and then he blinks and it's just his Sam watching him again. "I haven't been good enough about making sure you're handling all of this all right," she says. "And I'm sorry. *Are you okay?*"

It makes him laugh, because he's not even sure what 'okay' means. "Haven't gone crazy and started chewing on the padded walls yet," he says, trying to make a joke out of it. It'll all be a little bit better if he can get her to laugh.

But she doesn't. After a second, he realizes that they've all *been* there, and he really needs to start watching what comes out of his mouth a little more closely. "The most important part of this job is taking care of each other," she says. "And the hardest part is learning how."

It doesn't sound like his Sam, who's always been more comfortable with things that tick and click than things that involve any kind of emotion. Cam wonders who he's hearing echoes of. He wishes he'd chosen something else to make for dinner; the chicken is a solid lump in his stomach. "I'm getting some conflicting signals here," he says.

He's expecting her to need clarification -- he's still adjusting to the concept of a version of Sam with anything even approaching the level of emotional awareness she seems to have learned somewhere -- but all she does is make a tiny "hmm" noise. "I guess I can see why,"

she says. He opens his mouth to try to explain anyway -- he doesn't think she *does*, doesn't think she has the distance and the detachment necessary to realize the inherent dichotomy between "I don't trust you to watch our backs" and "I want to help keep this crazy job from breaking you apart" -- but she keeps going. "Would it help if I told you that Daniel's very, very good at helping someone navigate the territory between crazy-but-functional and completely over the edge?"

No, he thinks; it wouldn't. Because that just compounds the question of what she knows and what she thinks about it, and he's got the crazy impression that they're having two different conversations *anyway*, and also? Now he's wondering what Jackson did to her. Did for her. Because he's been trying for the past ten months not to see the signs, and he's gotten really damn good at lying to himself, but apparently he's been lying to himself an awful damn lot lately and the rest of the team has decided it's time to cut through all the bullshit.

"No," he says. "No, it doesn't."

She smiles a little, and it's soft and sad. "I know you're wondering what the hell you've gotten yourself into," she says -- and really, he doesn't know who this pod person is and what it did with his baby girl. "But look at it from our end. We had to be sure you were really going to stick around."

Before what, he wonders? Before they started trying to change him? Before they decided that it was okay to let him in on whatever secrets they're keeping?

"Baby," he says, and he's feeling more than a little bit desperate, "I have *no earthly clue* what's going on."

She reaches across the table; her grip is warm, but not at all reassuring, as she closes her hand around his wrist. "I know," she says. "It's okay. You're one of us. And we take care of each other. Just let go a little. It's a soft landing, I promise."

It's not a consolation. And later, as she hugs him goodnight, quick and fleeting, he closes his eyes against the smell of her hair and feels the ache settling deep down into the pit of his stomach, because he'd come into this job expecting the strange and the unusual, but he's always thought some things would never change.

They'd all warned him when he came into the SGC, everyone from the old hands of the Gate teams all the way down to the guy who mops the floors in the cafeteria, that if you stay at the SGC long enough, you start to go crazy. He knows, from reports, that the shrinks postulate that the human brain can't summon up enough flexibility to take in the six impossible things that happen daily around here. The impossible hasn't been bothering him, not at all. He's always prided himself on being able to handle things that seem crazy in stride. There's some irony, he thinks, in the fact that he's only starting to think he might be going crazy when the people around him started reassuring him that if he does start to go crazy it'll all be okay.

**thursday**

They get pulled into a search & rescue for SG-15, four hours overdue for check-in from P4R-7G6. Cam overhears Lt. Velasquez calling it a "bag & tag". He doesn't mean it disrespectfully, Cam knows, but it rankles anyway.

SG-15 is crucified naked, clad only in flowers, over the hill just past the foot of the Gate, where the MALP couldn't find them. No sign of the natives, no sign of a Prior, no sign of any of their gear. It takes fifteen people two hours to get them down and ready for transport. Cam fingers his P-90 the entire time, starting at every noise, watching over his shoulder and looking for something he can shoot.

He sleeps okay that night, but only because he remembered to pick up a bottle of bourbon at the liquor store, and when he's drunk he never dreams.

### **saturday (team night again)**

Sam's turn to host; Cam makes his usual offer to cook, but Sam waves it off, and Cam's okay with pizza or Chinese or whatever takeout they settle on. He offers Teal'c a lift, the way he usually does when it's not his turn to host, and they're usually quiet in the car but this time Teal'c seems to have something he's waiting to say.

Cam gives him time and space -- one thing he's learned about Teal'c is that it's no use trying to push the man if he's not ready to say whatever's on his mind; he'll just clam up and you'll never get anything useful out of him. So instead Cam just wraps his fingers around his steering wheel and wishes he hadn't given up smoking years back, because he could sure use the distraction.

"It is not my place to say anything," Teal'c finally begins, looking out at the road that's rising up in front of them instead of over at Cam.

Which means that whatever it is, it's personal -- Teal'c has a very finely developed sense of what's appropriate and what's not, and personal matters fall into the category of things that just aren't discussed unless there's a very pressing need for it. Cam wishes for that cigarette again. Three times he always regrets having quit: driving, drinking, and just after sex. And, well, he's been doing a lot of one and two, and not so much of the third. "It's okay," he says, instead. "You can say anything you think you need to say to me. We're cool."

He expects that to get a smile, or at least the quick tilt of lips that passes from a smile for Teal'c, but instead Teal'c just sighs, a soft and heavy shifting of breath. "You are -- confused," Teal'c finally starts. Picking his words carefully, Cam thinks. He always does. "Uncertain of what your role is, and of the roles of others. This is not an easy life."

"Yeah," Cam says. A Jeep with an anti-abortion sticker on the bumper passes him, in the no-passing zone. He thinks for a second about being a dick, speeding up and making it have to drop back behind, but instead he takes his foot off the gas and lets it go. "Funny thing is, people keep telling me that lately, and I didn't think it was true until they started to."



Teal'c is silent for a minute, trying to trace through the levels of Cam's words, perhaps. Whatever's going on in that skull of his must be deep, because the silence lasts for longer than it usually does when Teal'c is trying to figure out the economy of words necessary to get his point across properly. "Daniel Jackson and Samantha Carter are damaged," he says finally, and Cam almost laughs -- because, really, *no fucking shit*, talk about your obvious statements -- but Teal'c hasn't paused to let him get a word in edgewise. "There is no malice there, but there is pain. Old pain. And they have come to terms with their pain, and have found ways that they may live with the consequences they have invited."

Cam opens his mouth to say something -- this isn't the kind of thing he should be hearing from Teal'c, really; as much as he'd like to know, to *understand*, and as much as Teal'c has an insider's view while he's still standing with his nose pressed up against the glass, it's also the kind of thing he should figure out himself, because if he hears it from someone else he'll never know if it's true or not. Not down deep, where he knows what he knows about people. But Teal'c isn't done yet. "There is much you could learn from them, and much you should not be forced to. They have decided you are worthy of teaching. Be certain it is a lesson you are willing to learn."

From Teal'c, this is the equivalent of a soliloquy. Which means it must be important, so Cam shuts his mouth again, and turns the thoughts over in his head a few times. It's validation -- because yeah, Teal'c is right; whatever the fuck is going on here isn't something that would have cropped up overnight, which means it's been going on the whole time and Cam somehow managed to miss it, which means that they've consciously chosen to *show* him and that *does* mean he's passed a threshold. But it's also as though Teal'c can see right down into his head, right into the thoughts that have been keeping him up at night -- and he wonders, suddenly and with more anger than he expected, whether or not *everyone* at the SGC knows that he fucked Jackson, or Jackson fucked him, or *whatever* the fuck happened that night. Wonders if everyone knows he's been thinking of Sam's hands for years. It's like living in a fishbowl, without even having a little plastic castle to retreat behind. Or something like that. "I'm just here to do a job," he says. It's more sharp than he intended.

But Teal'c seems to relax at it, settling back into the passenger's seat and folding his hands in his lap. "As are we all," he says. Cam wonders if that really is regret he hears in Teal'c's voice, and if so, what could have put it there. And he thinks, not for the first time, that maybe -- just maybe -- Teal'c is the most human of them all.

The movie sucks again, but he has only himself to blame this time; he'd picked *The Butterfly Effect* because he'd wanted to listen to Sam bitching about the time-travel physics involved. He always likes listening to her when she gets on a good roll, waving her hands around and yelling at the screen. And the movie had been pretty good, or at least good enough, except he'd looked over about twenty minutes in to find the other three still and silent, with that look on their faces that say that he's done something *outrageously stupid* again, and he can't figure out what the hell it was or why they've got that scary kind of stillness he can't read and doesn't want to try.

When it's over, Jackson offers to drive Teal'c home, and Cam winds up sitting on Sam's couch with his head dropped back against the cushions, watching her fuss with the electronics to

keep from looking at him. "I feel like I should be apologizing for something," he says, finally. "And I don't know what. Or why."

She forces a smile, but it doesn't go past her lips, and she can't look at him. "It's okay," she says. "Lot of unmarked minefields around here. It was a pretty good movie."

He's been trying to figure out just *what* minefield he tripped for the past hour and a half -- he can't think of anything in any of the mission reports that'd qualify, which means it must be one of the ones they didn't write down, and oh, he hadn't appreciated until he started *writing* the damn things just how much gets white-washed and prettied up so the brass don't flip their lids. Took him a while to learn the knack of what to put in and what to leave out, himself. So there are things he doesn't know, despite knowing every report forwards, backwards, and inside-out, and realizing that was, he thinks, his first step on the path to figuring out what might keep him here and all right.

He opens his mouth to say something noncommittal, some offer to clean up the dead pizza boxes or something, and what comes out is, "You've changed."

She stops in mid-fuss, sits back on her heels and leaves the wires alone. "Yes," she says, simply, instead of arguing. "I have."

"Are you happy?" It's an important question. It's suddenly the most pressing question he has.

And she smiles. There's nothing in the world like his baby girl when she smiles, and this is a good one, free and open and easy. "Yes," she says. "I stopped caring about what other people were trying to make me into, and started caring about what I wanted to be."

There are a thousand questions on his lips -- what it is she wants to be, what it was that let her make the switch, who did it for her (*Jackson*) and who taught her how to be so free and easy inside her skin, but there's no denying that she's telling him the truth. Or at least the truth as she sees it. There's something floating around in the back of his head, about fish and water and not knowing when it's wet, but Sam's standing up and pushing a hand through her hair and stretching, slow and easy, and his mouth is going dry when her t-shirt rucks up to show the little strip of skin at the small of her back.

"What do you want to be, Cam?" she asks, quietly. And it's the first time he can remember anyone asking him that question since he was about *twelve*, and he knows he's gotta be gaping at her like he's some kind of idiot, but she's smiling at him anyway.

She crosses the room on bare feet, drops herself down on the couch next to him. Sideways. Her knees are tucked up against her chest, and she worms her feet underneath his thigh. "Baby," he says -- wanting to reach for her, wanting to run away -- and then runs out of words again.

"See, the thing is," she says, and oh *God* those are her fingers tracing patterns on the top of his thigh and he can feel it right through his jeans, right all the way up to his dick, "that's what you get here. You don't have to pretend. I didn't realize that for a long time, and I had to hurt a lot to figure it out." Flick, curve, *tickle*, and Cam doesn't know if he wants to grab her

hand to stop her or grab her hand to move it up to where he's suddenly imagining it going. "I don't want you to hurt. I love you."

It's not the first time she's ever said it to him, but it's the first time she's ever said it without him saying it first.

"I," he says, and then he does grab her hand, squeezing it tightly -- too tightly -- and pulling it away. She doesn't protest, just wraps her arms around her knees and watches him. It's not one of her looks. It's one of Jackson's, and all of a sudden this whole damn nightmare all comes crashing down on him again and he needs to get *out*. She watches him as he pushes himself to his feet. "It's late," he says, casting about for an acceptable excuse.

"You don't have to go," she says. And oh, God, that's an invitation if he's ever heard one, and there's bed and sweat and sex in between the lines of her voice. And that's wrong, because his Sam shouldn't *know* that tone; she never has before.

He can't even remember what excuse he uses to get himself out the door, and he doesn't turn his head back over his shoulder to see what's on her face once he does. He just goes home, where he throws himself down on the couch and watches the UNC-Duke game the TiVo recorded -- Carolina loses, which just *goes to fucking show* -- and eventually, once the sun is starting to paint the sky purple and violet, slips into restless and broken sleep.

### **monday (afternoon)**

They get sent off to P37-955. Cam feels like he's underwater, like his ears are stopped up with cotton, like the whole world's wrapped in a layer of gauze.

Half an hour after they get there, a Prior comes through the Gate. Everyone's staring at him like he's *lost his mind* when he makes them all duck into an empty building, listen quietly to the preacherman routine. His fingers are itching, and he wants to get out there and *do*. But. But.

They make it home without incident. He thinks Sam and Jackson might be trading looks behind his back as they walk back through the Gate, but he can't tell. It feels like there's something missing, like everything's bare and broken. But he's not going to give them any more reason to worry about him. He's got enough reason to worry about himself.

### **monday (night. or tuesday morning. whatever.)**

They stick around when the Prior leaves, tossing out options, trying to convince the people of '955 that resistance isn't futile after all. It doesn't work too well. When they get back, Cam's the first one cleared through Medical, and he hits the locker room as quickly as he can. Strips quickly, showers even more quickly. If he can get out of here before any of the rest of them makes it there, he can get home and get away and -- he stops there, because he doesn't know

what comes next, but he knows that whatever it is, it involves space and time and *distance*, because he thinks he's getting close to drowning.

It's not quickly enough. When he gets out of the shower, Jackson's leaning against his locker. There's nobody else in sight, which isn't strange at this time of morning. No, what's strange is the way the look in Jackson's eye, distant and contemplative, makes the pit of Cam's stomach turn over and flutter into a low, pleasant grind.

"Come here," Jackson says quietly. Purposefully.

Cam doesn't move. "It's late," he says. It is. It's the middle of the night, and they all missed dinner, and Cam's exhausted and hungry and he's due back here in another five hours; he'd sleep on-base if he didn't need to feel clean air on his face.

Jackson tilts his head, like Cam's just said something profoundly stupid. Cam knows that look pretty well, too. "Come here," he repeats, in the exact same tone, and holds out a hand.

Feeling a little bit like a dog being called to heel, Cam goes.

He can see the tip of Jackson's tongue peeking out from between his lips as Jackson tucks his fingers into the wrap of the towel around Cam's waist and tugs him closer. Cam stumbles a little -- he wasn't expecting it, he tells himself, nothing more -- and Jackson could have reached out a hand to catch him, but doesn't; instead, he tugs a little more, and the towel parts and slithers down Cam's legs to pool on the floor.

"Hey," Cam says, but Jackson looks up and that fierce concentration is still written across his face. Cam's dick twitches; it's like some kind of sick Pavlovian response to the light glinting across Jackson's glasses, the professorial look on Jackson's face like he might launch into a lecture at any minute.

"You're trying too hard," Jackson says. It takes a second for Cam to drag his brain into the right conversation, before he realizes Jackson's talking about the day's fun and games. "With all of it. Let go."

Whatever Cam was going to say turns into a muffled squeak when Jackson's fingertips stroke down the length of his dick.

The first thing Cam thinks is *oh God, yeah, I need this*, but the second thing he thinks is *he has the worst timing in the fucking universe*. It's harder than he'd expect to catch Jackson by the wrist, pull his hand away. "Not here," he says, even though his dick's starting to sit up and beg.

Jackson smiles. More like a smirk, really, but Cam's willing to be generous. "It's perfectly safe," he says.

Cam has no idea what Jackson's idea of 'safe' is, but then again, he's got no idea what Jackson's idea of just about anything is. "Not here," he repeats, catching Jackson's eyes with his own and holding them. He can't remember ever being completely naked in front of

someone fully dressed before. It makes him feels edgy, like his skin itches, even though Jackson's eyes never dip below his neck.

For a second, he thinks Jackson might argue the point, but instead, all he does is free himself from Cam's grip -- with a quick neat motion, something Cam can't follow -- and stoop down to pick up the towel. He doesn't look up, but Cam can practically feel the heat radiating from his body, right on an even keel with Cam's dick, and God, he's gotta be nuts to be turning this down, but yeah. Bad fucking idea, and he's still got enough self-control to be thinking with big head instead of little head, even *if* this is the second time in three days someone's hit on him and he's starting to get awfully tired of saying no.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Jackson says, light and pleasant, and tosses the towel over Cam's shoulder.

He missed something. He missed something, and whatever it was he missed, he missed it *big*. "Right," he says, feeling his heart thumping in his chest. He takes a step backwards, taking him out of Jackson's personal space, and resists the urge to cover himself up with the towel; he wouldn't for anyone else, just two guys in a locker room, no funny stuff going on here.

Instead, he pulls civvies from his locker, stuffs himself into underwear and jeans, pulls a shirt over his head. He's painfully aware of Jackson stripping behind him. Want isn't get, and he doesn't even know what he wants, and suddenly he remembers Teal's with the headlights of oncoming cars playing across his face and saying *be certain you wish to learn*.

The silence in the room is palpable. Cam pulls his jacket on, slings his duffel over his shoulder. He can hear Jackson rummaging around in the bottom of his locker, but he makes himself not look. "Catch you tomorrow," he says, trying to keep it casual.

"Yeah," Jackson says, distracted, and then his voice sharpens. "Mitchell?"

Cam's expecting a request to borrow shampoo or something -- for some reason Jackson never has his own -- so he judges it's safe enough to turn around. Jackson's still poking around in his locker, naked as the day he was born, and Cam's eyes immediately fall on that goddamn gorgeous ass. It makes his mouth water just looking at it, remembering another scenario entirely, knowing what it felt like to be balls-deep and shaking from the weight of it.

He takes a deep breath. "Yeah?" he asks.

"The next time you say no is the last time I offer."

It's so light and casual it takes Cam a minute to realize that it wasn't the expected request for toiletries. When he does, it arcs straight through him, head down to dick and all the way back up, and he turns whatever noise he was going to make into a cough that comes out as half splutter.

Jackson shuts his locker door and bestows a half-smile on Cam. "Have a good night," he says, and walks, jaybird-naked and not in the least bit self-conscious about it, across the room to the showers.

It takes Cam longer than he'd care to admit for him to reboot his brain and get moving again; the shower's already steaming up the room before he's ready to push the door open and face the outside world.

It's a good thing he took that extra minute, too, because Sam's leaning against the wall next to the door, looking for all the world like she's settled in for the long haul. Her eyes widen for half a second when she sees him, and he stops dead, because he knows a lot of things about Sam Carter and one of those things is that she can't bluff for shit.

She knew he was in there. And she was expecting him to take longer than he did.

He walks past her without saying a word, and she doesn't stop him. He walks past her without a word, and he gets in the elevator, and he rides it to the surface, and he smiles at all the guards at all the checkpoints, and then he goes home and pulls the pillow over his head and wonders whether he'll even make it through the rest of the week without going over the edge.

## **tuesday**

His to-do list is longer than his arm, and he's counting on a quiet day to give him a chance to get caught up, but just as he's settling in to write one of his reports (he's so far behind on that Landry's starting to drop ominous hints) there's a knock on the door. Cam can't remember the kid's name -- a Second Lieutenant just out of the Academy, recruited to the program on the advice of General Kerrigan -- but the kid's not doing too well and whatever excuse he's invented to invite himself into Cam's office has nothing at all to do with what he's really there for.

The SGC's crawling with shrinks and counselors and chaplains, dozens of people brought in to help keep the best-and-brightest from going around the bend, and the shrinks go crazy faster than the people they're supposed to be shrinking. It's a hell of a way to run a command. And Cam's still the new guy, and he's not in any shape to be dealing out support to anybody else, but he's used to being the guy everyone goes to when they need a little dose of "okay", and if that means he has to fake "okay" for a twenty-two year old kid who's in the middle of a crisis of faith about his competence, his capability, and his place in the universe, well, he'll do his damn best.

He isn't sure how much he helps. He has to fall back on quoting Gran'ma -- and Gran'ma's got a lot of good advice, always has, but it's a pain in the ass to try to make it make sense to someone who didn't grow up the way he did. It's not that he doesn't know what to say; the kid's really just looking for someone to tell him that just because *these* gods are false doesn't mean *his* God is. And Cam can do that. But halfway through he starts thinking about the blind leading the blind -- *for if they fall, one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up*, he thinks, and then stops himself, because the next lines go places he really doesn't want to go and damn his memory for scripture anyway.

He's missed lunch by the time he's done, but at least the kid goes away a little bit happier. Or a little less upset, which isn't quite the same thing, but it's close enough.

Cam shuts the door and goes back to sitting at his desk, but the cursor of the word processing program blinks at him balefully while he stares off into the distance. There are a thousand things he should be thinking about, but he keeps coming back to the look on Sam's face, last night, standing in the hallway and waiting. Waiting for him; waiting for someone else, standing sentry for something Cam can't even guess. Sam keeps throwing him at Jackson, and Jackson keeps throwing him at Sam, and nobody seems to give a good goddamn about what *he* wants.

Except they do. Well, Sam does, at least, and Jackson -- who the fuck knows what Jackson cares about, but at least he doesn't think Jackson's actively trying to harm him, which he thinks might be the best he's gonna get. So the question is -- what *does* he want? He'd thought he wanted SG-1, and he'd gotten it, but he got the name and not the reality. And then the reality had happened to him, because he's persistent, because he's *stubborn*, except it hadn't been anything like what he'd been expecting and he's starting to wonder if it's just because he's new or if this gap between legend and reality has always been there.

For a minute, he wishes he could call up O'Neill, ask him straight out: *hey, is it normal for half the team to be trying to fuck me, or are they just trying to fuck me over?* Except *yeah*, that's so far from being the brightest thing he could possibly do that he thinks it might come back 'round to the other side, and he might be feeling lost, but he's not feeling *suicidal*.

He wonders which one of them O'Neill was sleeping with. If O'Neill was sleeping with either of them. He wonders what kind of damage writes so deeply that going crazy is a logical and inevitable way of coping, except he's more than a little scared that he's going to find out. He wonders whether this is the kind of thing he joined SG-1 to learn, and if so, whether he'd make the same choices over again if he knew ahead of time.

He wonders why he keeps thinking about the way Jackson's voice sounds when he gives orders, the clip and snap that makes Cam want to roll over and show his belly, and why for the first time in his life he's wishing for someone, *anyone*, to just take over, take charge, and tell him what to *do*. Except he thinks he knows the answer to that one. It's not the first time in his life he's been in command of something, even something *important*, but it is the first time in his life where nothing he does, nothing he tries to do, ever seems to work the way it should.

Tuesday afternoons, whenever they're on-world, he and Teal'c have a standing appointment; it covers half of Cam's weekly required physical conditioning hours, and he's painfully aware now that he's probably the last living creature in the galaxy who knows the Sodan warrior tradition. Ironic, really, when you think about it, that Jolan had only taught him grudgingly at first. He's not arrogant enough to think he knows it all, but passing on what he knows is better than letting it all fade to dust and legend, and so he and Teal'c will meet every Tuesday until Cam runs out of things to teach. He's not sure, but he thinks maybe Jolan would approve.

Today, though, he's distracted, and even though Teal'c usually manages to score more hits than Cam can block, it's bad enough that Teal'c finally lowers his staff and helps Cam back up to his feet. Cam takes the hand -- he doesn't *think* that ankle's broken, but it sure as hell hurts enough to put weight on it -- and stays crouched over, breathing heavily, resisting the urge to just sink down onto the floor and pound his fists against the mats.

"You are troubled," Teal'c says.

Cam's exhausted enough, on edge enough, that he snaps back, "No fucking *shit*." He feels bad immediately, the way he always does -- Teal'c is just trying to help, and it's not his fault that his way of starting a personal conversation is to make an observation that can be accepted as a route in or ignored as an imposition.

But Teal'c doesn't take Cam's rudeness as a cue to be quiet. Which tells Cam, or should tell him, just how serious Teal'c thinks this is. "Do not make the mistake," he says, "of confusing desire and need. Desire may be safely ignored. Need cannot. To command and survive, one must know the difference, and be willing to either take what is being offered, or find another solution elsewhere." Teal'c's eyes rake him over, and Cam gets the sense that this is Teal'c's own quiet version of the down-to-the-bone stare. "It is not my place to offer you commentary on your choices. I believe it would be wise for you to satisfy your need elsewhere. But whatever you choose, choose soon, for if you do not, the choice will be made for you."

Cam stands there, in the tiny base gym a hundred feet below ground, with his ankle throbbing and his shirt soaked through with sweat, and the backs of his eyes feel gritty the way they always do when he hasn't slept right in weeks. This is the closest Teal'c will get to warning him, he knows, but he is suddenly and viscerally fucking *sick* of veiled hints and mysterious statements and the way nobody around here ever seems to come out and *say* what they're thinking. What they want. What they need.

He needs his people to trust him. He needs to be someone they can rely on. He needs a good night's sleep. He needs to know what's going on around here. (He needs an outlet. He needs something to crawl under his skin and scratch all those itches. He needs something to make him feel like flying, needs something to remind him he's still alive and he still can feel and he's not lying useless in a hospital bed somewhere dead from the waist down and determined the doctors are going to be wrong when they tell him he's never going to walk again.)

He wants to ignore half those needs. Or, no: he wants not to have them in the first place. Because they're not who he wants to be, but apparently they are who he *is* and he really, really could have lived the rest of his life without ever knowing it.

Teal'c is watching him. Cam thinks: *he's trying to warn me not to get involved*. Cam thinks: *it's too fucking late*.

That night, when he gets home, he kicks off his shoes and stares at the couch, at the remote, at the remnants and detritus of a life lived in half-suspension in front of the TV. He thinks of that strip of skin between Sam's t-shirt and her jeans. He thinks of Jackson, sitting on the floor and swinging a beer bottle between two fingers. He thinks of Sam's fingers on Jackson's neck, and Jackson's smile, and Sam running her fingers through Jackson's hair. He thinks about how this used to be *his* apartment, and now it seems like every time he turns around, he's thinking of one of them.

He walks past the couch -- enough time spent there, in the past few weeks, and it's not comfortable enough to warrant it. Past the TV; nothing he wants to watch, and it hasn't been doing a damn lick of good to distract him from all the things he doesn't want to think about. Past the kitchen -- he's not hungry, hasn't been for a while, and yeah, he *knows* that's a



symptom of something and he doesn't fucking *care*. He starts stripping off his t-shirt when he hits the hallway, and he's pushing down his jeans as he passes through the door to his bedroom, and he strips off his boxer-briefs and throws them onto the top of the mound of dirty laundry and stretches himself out naked on the bed. He does not once consciously think *fuck it, just fuck it*, but it's there, simmering under the surface: he's not going to win for losing, and if this is what crazy is, well, he might as well try the advice everyone's been giving him and give in to it, because maybe that'll *shut it up* and his mind can go back to being his own again for a little while.

He reaches for the hand lotion he keeps by the bed. Closes his eyes. Grips the base of his dick, firm and rough, and thinks of the swell of Sam's breast. The lines of Jackson's dick. Sam, naked, golden, straddling Jackson's hips, rocking herself back and forth, with Jackson's head thrown back, two of her fingers in his mouth. The way they would move together, steady, solid, in late-afternoon sunshine on a lazy Sunday afternoon. The familiar ease of two people who know each others' bodies so intimately, so completely, that they no longer need to ask permission. Slow and warm and sweet, taking comfort from each other, giving and offering and accepting in turn.

Except the pictures in his head keep changing, until Sam's thrusting her fingers roughly between Jackson's lips, fucking his mouth as he fucks her cunt, and Jackson's fingers are gripping her hips tightly enough to bruise, tightly enough for his fingernails to leave marks, and -- no, that's not how it would be, that's not how it *should* be, but every time he tries to yank it back, tries to make it be beautiful (the way Sam would be beautiful, should be beautiful) it's *there*, Jackson rolling her over, poised over her with his weight on his arms, and she's rearing up, snarling, her teeth closing on the tendons of his neck, and he's taking his weight onto his knees and reaching between her legs, pinching her clit, and she's throwing back her head and gasping something obscene, coming, like she's coming apart, and *no* he is not going to *think* about this --

-- and he realizes he's *there*, that the eye of his fantasy has painted him into the corner, kneeling, *watching*, and he thinks that the reason he is there is because Jackson has told him to be, and he imagines the lingering taste of Jackson's come in his mouth and the ache and burn of his jaw, well-used, and the way his dick would be hard, so hard, because he wasn't allowed to come himself, not until they were finished, not until --

-- no, *no*, not like this, he doesn't *want* this, he never has, he isn't *like* that --

-- and he can hear Sam's voice, thin and breathless, rising, moaning, and Jackson buries his face in her neck and moves his hand between their joined bodies, roughly, demanding, and they've both forgotten he's even here and he can't move, Jackson told him not to, and if he's good, if he does it right, one of them (*Jackson*) will reward him, and that's all he wants, that's all he's ever wanted, to be good, to do the right thing --

-- *no* --

-- and he's coming into his hand, shouting loudly enough that the neighbors must be thinking about banging on the wall, and when it's all over, he throws an arm over his eyes and bites down on his lip until he can taste blood.

But he sleeps without dreaming.

### **saturday (late)**

Jackson doesn't leave after Team Night this time, either. Cam sits in the chair and Jackson sits on the couch and Cam hasn't been drinking, hasn't dared a drop, because he keeps thinking one of them is going to be able to look at his face and *know* and that's the last thing he wants to have happen.

The silence *hurts*. Cam doesn't know why Jackson stayed, what Jackson wants, what Jackson's thinking, and he'd get up and start giving those subtle time-to-leave cues -- picking up the recycling, tidying up the kitchen -- except he's pretty fucking sure Jackson ignores any cues he doesn't want to pay attention to.

So he sits. And Jackson sits. And they don't say anything, and Jackson's got his eyes closed, and Cam would think he'd fallen asleep, until he holds out one hand and says -- calmly, firmly -- "Come here."

There's a minute when Cam feels like he might explode, like he might shake himself to pieces from the inside, like he's stretched thin and translucent and transcendent. Then he's on his feet, and a second later (unasked, unbidden, but oh, he wants, he *needs*) he's on his knees, and Jackson's jeans are soft and worn beneath his cheek as he rests it on Jackson's thigh.

Jackson makes a soft murmur, like he's content, like he *approves*, and rests his hand on the back of Cam's neck. "Yes," he says, quietly. "Better. It's a start."

Cam has no idea what Jackson means, or what he's starting, or what the hell is going on. Cam's got no fucking *clue* why he's here -- except this is *his* apartment, dammit, his space, and Jackson's taking up more of it than he has any right to. Cam's knees ache against the floor, and his heart is racing, and he can't make himself open his eyes.

"It's all right," Jackson says. And somehow, some way, for some reason, Cam believes it; here, now, like this, it is. "There's nothing to be afraid of. It's all right to get what you want."

He doesn't want this, he tries to say. He doesn't want this (*doesn't want to want this*) and he doesn't need this (*need to give it up need to give it over need to let go*) and he doesn't have any idea why his throat is so dry it hurts to swallow and he has *no earthly clue what comes next*.

Jackson's fingers stroke along the nape of his neck. Soft and reassuring. Cam shivers, once, all the way down to his bones, and he can feel something down in the deep parts of his head, the part where he doesn't ever let himself go, unfold and say *yes*.

"It's time to stop lying to yourself," Jackson says. And his hand slips beneath the collar of Cam's t-shirt, and his nails dig into the skin of Cam's back, and Cam lets his eyes open and his fists close and wonders, desperately, whether or not he'd recognize himself if he did.



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