

As Jim comes back from a dream that felt too real to be anything but a memory, a steady pressure encapsulates his naked body, slowly pulling on him. He tastes copper and something acidic in his mouth that he coughs into the narrow, steamy warm confines around him. Jim clenches as pain washes over him, every nerve ending screaming in a mind-wrenching symphony. He writhes in the tight moist passage until he sees a dim glow of energy and his pain drops to a faint pressure, though his eyes still flow with emotional tears. He lets out a whimper as the force pulling him increases, drawing a low amused rumble that vibrates his entire body.

"Still breathing, little prey? Good. I was starting to think I wasted perfectly good remorse on a corpse." Her voice is velvet over sharpened teeth, ancient as temples long forgotten, but young as the first time a woman discovers she can destroy a man with a smile. Her voice slides into his mind like a knife, but with a familiarity like it belongs there. His mind flashes back to his dream, then it dawns on Jim like a flash as his body slowly mends itself, he can't move because she is everywhere around him. A word slides into his mind, sounding ancient and powerful to him. *Cihuapillicoatl*. The thought is laced with emotions of surprise and regret as it's projected from her mind. He gasps the word in small breaths in the constricting passage and asks the voice in his head, "Was that... a dream, or a memory?"

He flinches as his confines clench painfully, a low hiss vibrating him before his slow movement continues. The voice bursts into his mind, he can feel a subtle rage building behind her alluring tone, "You saw it too, mortal? You glimpsed my fall, the fires and bodies?" Jim grits his teeth as he fights against the building flood of emotions as her thoughts enter his mind, his face awash with a stream of his tears. "Did you see my betrayal?" Her voice rising to drown out his thoughts.

"I felt everything, too." Jim said between gasps as his travel halted again. "It was too much for me to take. I wish I could help ease your suffering." Jim shakes as a low hiss and a sudden tremor passes through her body, pushing him towards a dim light, a splash of cold air cools his head. He yelps in pain as her body tenses with one last violent effort. With a sudden push he is expelled from her maw, his former fleshy prison, crashing onto a hard floor. His wet, naked body shivers on the cold ground, every inch slick and exposed. Jim can barely make out shapes in the darkness as a large form coils around his body, a tingling energy radiating from it, soothing his pain and tickling his acid-burned skin. He feels the low rumble start in the large presence before his brain is flooded with a melodic and beautiful laughter. "The old serpent was right. You are now mine, little prey. I have taken you, I have spared you, and you will be mine forever, whether you want it or not."

Jim tenses in the grasp of her form, unable to move his body in the unyielding wrap of her smooth scales around him. As his wounds mend, stuck in her coils, he reaches out and runs his hand along her smooth underbelly, her body tensing at first, then relaxing under his touch before he begs the question, "But, why me?"

A pause drops over the large body and his hand stops. He adsorbs the pulse of her heartbeat as its pace increases over the silence. He remains still in the moment hand pressed against her, holding his breath.

The projected voice sounds tired in his mind when she finally responds. "Because even after

everything... your aura still shows a spark of hope." Her coils shift nervously under his touch, like saying these words give away a fleeting power, "because when you looked into the secrets of a monster, you felt sorrow. Empathy." Jim gasps, as the pressure from her mental presence dims to a glimmer of hope, mirroring his own emotions, a breath of excitement, tinged with fear. "And when I tasted your soul, I found something I have been craving for a thousand years. Someone who even as they dissolved, dared to love their devourer."

Jim sees two large golden orbs glowing faintly in the darkness. He stares into them as they draw close, a pair of huge snake eyes boring into his soul, but he only feels peace. He relaxes in her grasp and submits to the soothing presence, healing his wounds. The voice in his head sounds distant and fading as she chants in his head, "Mine. Now, forever," until he fades into the warmth and safety of the large coiled body and the faint sound of rain. Her chant continues as he fades into shared visions of the past. *Mine. Now, forever.*

Raindrops streak down the window of a small apartment in downtown Seattle, creating a rhythm for the storm passing by a dim sunrise. It contrasts sharply with the warmth from a coiled embrace slowly peeling away a feeling of reluctant joy as a large frame slowly stirs to conscience, the real world enveloping her serpentine form. The soft rain continues to tap at a window nearby, robbing her of the freedom her spirit felt in dreams. Her body morphs under thin silk sheets as her dream fades into the soft rhythmic tapping sounds. Lady Snake could suddenly feel her hair tickling her neck and shoulders, her long, ageless limbs slowly twitch with each ache and pain as nerves fire to life, causing a sudden breath. Unable to open her eyes due to the mask on her face keeping them covered, she reaches out with her enhanced senses and magical perception. The sudden weight of decisions, her emotions, and the last few days' events flood her brain as her senses come to a focus. There is her prize, laying passed-out next to her.

She stares at the sleeping form beside her, enjoying the sounds of rain, the warmth from his body, and his peaceful expression as he rests. After so many centuries of searching, she can't help but feel lost in mixed emotions.

*He might be the one, this little prey. Her heart fluttered with hope and a sudden feeling of warmth. He could also be another in a line of greedy mortals. A pit formed in her stomach. Dammit. Centuries of living and I will never get used to this body's whims. She watches him for minutes that stretch into eternity, flashing back to visions of burning temples, smelling the incense and blood as she shifts between the magical and physical realms, basking in his warm spark of an aura and small physical body.*

*Clean. At least I can trust that he isn't being possessed or manipulated. I also need to know what happened to Heron and Dog, so I need him up and moving. She leans closer to her prize. To think, I almost..oh well, he'll never know I tasted his soul. The visions I experienced while digesting him were a powerful premonition. Father's words were enough to make me doubt myself and spare you, my prey. He rolls in his sleep, facing her and she reaches out, brushing drool off his cheek. Fortunate for you, cute little prey. I need to clean you up, it's almost time for my performance and this has to work. Don't make me finish what I started, for both our sake.*

*No more putting it off. I suppose it's time to clean up and change into something more suitable for*

*this meeting.* Lady Snake leans over, hesitating a bit in the closeness. She steals a kiss from her prize on his cheek before rolling out of bed. She stretches her tall feminine frame, tendons popping and snapping as she walks to the attached bathroom. She draws a circle of blood around herself and starts a prayer, slowly filling the small space with a thick haze. Minutes later a youthful Asian man in an eyeless masquerade mask emerges from the cloud. She takes a seat, takes a breath and walks her soul out of her new body, turning to look back at her current form. *This one is a recent addition and it's taking a while to get used to. At least he won't be missed, his evil soul was delightful to devour, a far cry from my spark.* She dresses in a fine suit and practices becoming the man she now appears to be, as lingering dark thoughts crept into the back of her mind. Seeing her father after so long, she feels guilt for her actions that she hasn't felt in years. *This man is gone. I ate his body and soul greedily, yet my little prey is safe. Is following my father's way possible after all my transgressions? Am I worthy of my true form and power?* Lady Snake furrows her brow, and checks her pockets, finding the distraction she needs, a small electronic device in the jacket.

The Serpent's form walks into the small bedroom of the safe-house and stops at the large and plushly padded bed. She smiles as she sees her prize, hacker extraordinaire, Jim Hawkins sleeping soundly. After his kidnapping, interrogation, and partial digestion, Jim was in serious need of healing and rest. His pitiful, acid scorched, and broken body sent her into a panic after she regurgitated him. *How could someone so small take so much abuse? It took almost everything I had to tear him from death's grasp. I hope he is worth the effort.* This left her poor little prize alone, naked, coated in dragon juices, and completely at her whims.

Lady Snake pauses as she stands over her Jim, hesitating to wake him. She feels overwhelmed by recalling the strange events of the past few days, almost wondering if it was real. *Finding my prey, him turning out to be linked to the opportunity I need, a way out of my deals and maybe even having the chance at, no, it's too early to be that hopeful.* She ended that line of thinking quickly. Her history caused her to be cautious of humans and dealing with them. Jim and his mercenary group stumbled into her life, making a name for themselves causing trouble for her newest masters in the Tong Crime Syndicate. Investigation into them brought nothing but dead ends and dead bodies. No one was able to defeat her attempts at tracking and tailing so far, and this change rattled the long-lived pro. *They have to be connected to someone big. Government, Corp, maybe bigger? Global? Now that is terrifying... but it is my only way out.*

"Rise and shine, prey." Snake's voice said in a low velvety, soothing tone, recalling her chanted lullaby that claimed him earlier. She taps his forehead softly with the rhythm of a conductor's baton. "My great stage awaits, let's make sure you can play your part, shall we?"

Jim can only groan in pain as he flinches.

*Where the hell am I?* Jim suddenly takes a deep breath and panics as he can't open his eyes. Whatever high he was riding has worn off. Now his head feels too small for its contents, his body broken, and his naked skin is drenched in something sticky that is slowly burning him. Jim hears a vibration that might be a voice, the tone sounding familiar as it resonates in his head. *No way is that the same voice as my dream.* He flinches as something hits his forehead hard enough to cause a

reverberating pain and stars in his closed eyes. "Fuu.... you?" he barely croaks in response, his swear mangled into a question as he flashes back to two glowing golden eyes. He hears the vibration again and strong hands start to move him around the bed, trying carefully to get him on his feet. Jim didn't fight against it. His body is hardly responding to his own commands as he is lifted to his feet, causing him to wobble and grab onto whoever is helping him up.

Jim blinks until he can open his eyes, he becomes more cognizant of his surroundings and a dimly lit, unfamiliar apartment comes to view. He freezes while holding on to his potential captor or savior. "Wait, am I still being tortured?"

"Ah, there you are," the vaguely familiar voice rumbles through Jim. "Plans have changed. You have become very valuable to me, Mr. Hawkins." The grip on Jim tightens and the contact starts to feel possessive, pulling him closer when the word valuable is said.

"Great. Valuable like a data-chip, or bait?" Jim said weakly, starting to see his fresh-faced captor for the first time. His eyes are covered in a black masquerade mask, covering them completely, as he laughs musically at Jim's bad joke, showing no signs of the mask impeding his vision. He is tall for most Tong, at least a head taller than Jim. The Tong has the face of a pop-singer and a slim build in his tailored suit, leading Jim to believe the strength he was using to move them both around so carefully has to be augmented.

"I'm glad to see your spark return so quickly. Let's get you cleaned up and dressed, you'll need to be in public soon. Do me a favor and just comply." The young Tong says to Jim as he wraps an arm around him, stabilizing him enough to walk.

"It's not as if I'm in any shape to fist-fight a fucking buffet of china-men, let alone one." Jim said between coughing fits, holding on to his captor. Much to Jim's surprise, his captor carefully leads him to the bathroom, gives him his cleaned and pressed gym-clothes, a Trauma slap-patch and a self-heating cup of soy-coffee. If his eyes weren't so battered and bloody, he would cry tears of joy for the soy-caff alone. The shower is a feeble attempt, with a lot of painful sobbing from Jim and assistance from the youthful gangster, who carries Jim out of the shower and dresses him, carefully minding the worst of his injuries. If it wasn't for the day of abuse and some things he can't seem to remember fully, Jim would almost think his captor actually didn't want him dead. Jim hobbles over and grabs the trauma slap-patch, rips the medicated bandage out of its packet and slaps it on his arm. Chemicals enter through his skin, immediately taking the sharpest pain out of his mind and bringing focus to his vision.

Jim feels light-headed and a wave of nausea as he tries walking to the sink. He stumbles and reaches out, Jim's captor catches him and sits him on the ground. As soon as he settles on the ground, Jim takes account of his surroundings. He is in a strange bathroom, unarmed, without his rig, without his comm-link, without caffeine or nicotine, beaten and stuck with some pretty-boy, low-level Tong gangster. *Get it together, Jim. You're still alive, so start with the simple problems and work from there.* His immediate concerns: Getting that soy-caff in his blood and finding a cigarette. Then he can care enough to figure out why he is still breathing. Jim reaches over and grabs the cup of soy-caff and hits the auto-heating button on the base, causing it to bubble and steam inside. Jim uses the scant seconds of the dark liquid heating to quietly observe his captor and think.

Jim is helping the Russians gangsters in their war against the Tong, so there is plenty of

bad blood. The Tong crime syndicate aren't known for their forgiveness, so there needs to be something he has or some data he stole keeping him alive. Jim racks his brain as he tries to come up with some reason for the change in plans. *Is it my data-chips? Stolen intel? Maybe a counter-trade? I had just done some good digging into our second target, Snake, when I got jumped. Fuck, I didn't even get much data uploaded from our sources.*

A sudden coffee company jingle chimes from the base of the soy-caff cup, breaking the silence, causing Jim to flinch. *One concern scratched.* Jim grabs the soy-caff and in a practiced motion, he opens the plastic film lid, blows on the steaming top until he can stand the near-scalding temperature and takes the cup in one pull.

Pure, unadulterated joy. Jim visibly relaxes as the liquid brings life to the beaten hacker. His burns and aches drawing his mind back to his vivid dreams. *No way that giant maw was real. I was out of my mind on something.*

After a long sigh, Jim is brought back to reality by a hand reaching out with a pack of cigarettes with a lighter in it. "Damn. If it isn't my brand." Jim said, reaching out for them with a nod.

"Well, they came from your desk. So just thank me for bringing them with you." The Tong said with a sly-smile and a cigarette in his other hand. Jim hesitates before grabbing the pack from the masked-goon. He fishes the lighter out and lights up. The gangster waves for the lighter and jokes "I didn't think anyone your age actually smoked these anymore."

"It's a dead habit I picked up from some old, long gone friends." Jim shrugs and tosses the lighter over at the disguised gangster. He notes his captor is deft, moving with the speed and coordination of a killer, Snake catches the suddenly tossed lighter without breaking eye-contact. *Fuck*, Jim fumes mentally as the Tong lights a cigarette and tosses the lighter back. *I am in no shape to run, no shape to fight.* Jim slumps as he resigns himself to his fate. *I am in it for the long-haul now and I can't seem to figure out what is going on.* "Alright, before you trade me off for death or more torture, who are we arranging a meeting with?" Jim asked, glaring into his captor's mask. A smile spreads across the face of the young tong and a small laugh escapes his mouth sounding soft and melodic, Jim sees a brief flash of two golden-blazing eyes behind the eyeless mask on the Tong's face. "We will arrange the meeting with your mercenary comrades. If all goes well, maybe you live to go home with them?"

*Those eyes! Wait, mercenary comrades? Aw crap, he means my team. My teams' planning skills are going to get us all killed. I hope they play along or this is going to be a short meeting.* "I guess. I mean, okay. Just don't wear your good shirt to the meet up, save that one for the funeral."

"Your comrades think so little of you, that they would double cross our little dealings, Mr Hawkins?" The Tong says with a snort and an eye-brow raising up over the mask.

"No, I don't think that. I just think they are too jumpy for some meet up in some abandoned parking structure or dark warehouse. You're more likely to get a better response from asking them for dinner and a drink."

The Tong shrugs and retorts "At least you brought it up first. I was going to suggest a tea house. Drinks, atmosphere, and with enough security to kill a small army."

"Can I at least have a meal before I die?" Jim asks with a frown, his stomach growls loud enough for both to hear.

"I'm sure I can send for some local take-out if you don't mind that as your last meal." The Sly Snake said through an ear-to-ear grin.

*Finally, some good news. "Gladly."*

The young Tong puts his cigarette out, then flashes a nervous grin. "Alright, Mr. Hawkins. It's time for me to log into your 'link. Just send me access and we can get you back with your friends." He holds out the comm-link for Jim to take.

Jim, now propped up on the bed, surrounded in empty take-out containers, frowns and grabs his comm-link. "I hope you don't go trying to root around in my 'link like some psycho-ex. My recent searches aren't for the faint hearted."

The gangster in disguise pauses but maintains a sly smile. *He doesn't suspect anything, it's a joke.* "Ha, I'm not after your booty-calls or personal files. I'm a professional." Snake smiles as he takes the comm-link back from Jim. *Witty little prey. If the impression I get from him is a sign, I need to be careful in how I word this. Stay simple and to the point, I only have one try at this dangerous play.* Snake composes the message quickly, giving basic verbal commands to the 'link to keep all actions open. He kept the message simple, asking for a parley with Jim's mercenary crew to make them an offer and give Jim back as a gesture of goodwill. The masked Tong sweats under the pressure as the group receives the message to no response, and then the chat springs to life. Messages fly back and forth between members who then respond, "Send current proof of life." Snake reads the comm-link out so Jim can get the message and sighs, "At least they want to know you are still alive. That is shockingly more than I was hoping for."

Jim takes the comm-link from the Tong, snaps a quick pic, flipping the comm-link camera the bird and sends it to the group. Snake takes back the device and quickly forwards the image to his private comm-link. *I think I'll hold on to that for posterity.* As he got the confirmation from his private comm-link, a single message came across Jim's private group "Confirmed, We'll be there."

"OK, Mr Hawkins. The meeting is confirmed, now how about I treat some of your injuries so you don't stumble around in public." Snake takes a medical kit, some zip-cuffs and a black bag out of a duffel bag, a serpentine smile on his boyish face as he prepares Jim for transport. Snake relishes the finishing touches, cuffing and black-bagging the hacker for his short ride to the meeting.

Jim blinks the pain away from his eyes as a black bag is taken off his head. His vision clears to see the back of a utility van and a familiar young Tong, his captor and healer. The disguised Snake gestures for him to get out of the van and follow. As he gets to his feet he quickly scans around to get a view of as much as he can in the area. It's a cool, dark night, with patchy clouds hiding the moon. Jim and his captor are flanked by armed Tong gangsters, sneering at him as they keep watch in a parking lot outside of an ornately designed, wooden panel building. Jim is escorted to a back door and into the heat of a busy kitchen. The staff stays in constant motion, occasionally spying a glance at Jim, never making eye-contact with the Tong gangsters. Jim follows the masked tong into a small office without the staff reacting to their passing, giving him the impression they have seen this kind of thing before. *Okay, Jim. You've made it this far. You just need to roll under a body and play dead when your team gets here and wait for extraction. Hopefully.* Minutes pass as they wait for the mercs to arrive. Jim wishes for a cigarette to help pass the time,

but he and his Tong captor had smoked his whole pack earlier. *I wonder what my guys have planned for this meeting? Double cross? "Gas and grab"? Man, I hope Jackal doesn't play "sniper in the bushes". I'll be dead for sure.*

"Ah, they are arriving now." Snake says, as he pockets his comm-link. "Once they are seated, we will go out to meet your comrades, Mr Hawkins. I would hope you would look more happy."

*Man, I hope they didn't plan to blow up the building, or maybe just a car-bomb? No, too expensive. Probably a vehicle-ram smash and grab. Better find someone shrapnel resistant to hide under. Fuck.* "Mr Hawkins," Snake waves at Jim, "are you listening?"

"Sorry, I am still marveling at my luck in this situation." Jim scratches his chin with zip-tied hands. "Normally, guys like me are just another name on a memorial wall if captured. Something doesn't seem right, but what the hell do I know?" shrugs Jim. He is deflecting but he isn't lying. Most runners would get a round hoisted in their memory at the bar after getting tagged or bagged.

There is a soft knock on the door. The young Tong grins with a smug smile "Sometimes, Mr Hawkins, you just need to have some faith in your fellow man. Now please, follow me closely and hopefully all of this can be worked-out."

A group of gangsters are waiting for them as they walk out of the small office. Jim can only hang on the words of the masked gangster as he follows behind him, surrounded by Tong gunmen. *Worked out? Does this guy not know who we iced yet? Maybe that's what this is about. We were hunting a guy named Snake who is the Tong's intel pro. He is supposed to be going to a meeting today that we were going to ambush. If he doesn't know Dog is dead, maybe we can offer a trade and geek them all?* Jim walks out of the kitchen with the goons clearing a path through the back of the restaurant to a large open-air garden in the structure's center. Signs show the path to the center of the garden where the secluded grotto is, gangsters leading Jim to his fate. *Wait, does that mean Snake will be at this meeting? Damn, anyone here could be Snake. I don't remember my torturer. Just this chuckle-head medic leading me around. We don't have a description yet, but no friggin way it's him.*

As Jim clears the lush garden, he finally gets a good view of the grotto. It was carved out of a huge boulder and is sunken into the stone-paved ground around the area. The sides had a small section carved though with tree roots and vines growing over it, carefully trimmed and grown to provide a screen of privacy, but still allow some light. Inside is a fine table with 8 seats, most of which are taken. As Jim's eyes adjust to the dim lighting in the grotto, he recognizes most of his team is here. He could see Frank, the white-haired ex-military gunman, Bert the weapons expert, Haru the archer martial artist, Ricardo the cyber-ninja, and the imposing Jackal, covered in cyberware. *No shark-man, but Jackal is in the flesh? Well, chrome.* Jim shoots Frank a questioning look across the table as his chair is pulled out by his captor. Frank frowns back, and nods over his shoulder. *I think that's a good sign? I think Smiles might be creeping around somewhere, now that is a terrifying thought.* The tension at the table is thick as Jim's captor slowly takes his seat next to him. The young-Tong claps and the tea service rolls in with staff escorted by Tong gangsters. Jim is happy to get the warm cup in his hands, being the only one not dressed for the chill rainy night. He gulps down the warm, boring liquid as he waits for someone to break the silence.

Frank was the first one to speak, not one to deal with bullshit. " Alright, we showed up, bastard." he grunts at the masked-Tong before he turns to Jim. "Jim, are you OK, buddy? Say

something only you would know so we know it's you."

Jim sinks into his chair and lets out a long sigh."I lost my gun last month in a firefight after getting shot in the ass, through both cheeks."

"Haha, damn I never heard about that one, Jim," Jackal's vox crackles with laughter.

"Yep, that's him." Frank says with a knowing nod and a smile. "So now that we know it's Jim, I'm guessing you are Snake? What did you want to talk to us so bad about that you snatched up a member of my crew?"

"Yes, I am known as Snake." Jim spit-takes tea, and glares at his captor "I assume you know the nature of my line of work. This is why I took your man. I spared this little prey after finding out your current assignment." Snake pauses and turns to Jim, "I wanted to know the fate of my coworkers as this may change our situation entirely. Dog is missing after your little stunt. I can't presume him dead, but he didn't respond to my requests for this meeting today. But then again, neither has my friend, Heron, and that causes me great distress."

"Well there's your problem, Mr Snake. That dog don't hunt." Bert smiles, trying to deliver his joke, but can't keep his laughter in. "Dog did the machine-gun shuffle and dogs can only do that trick once." Bert says as he adjusts his trademark aviators, barely stifling his laughter. Snake coughs in his teacup suddenly at the tasteless joke, spilling tea.

"The lot of you managed to kill that bastard Dog?" Snake said with a look of shock cracking through the gilded mask. Snake recovers quickly and responds using a velvet-smooth tone that gives Jim goosebumps, "but what of Heron?"

Frank shakes his head, eyeing the masked face warily. "We don't have anything on Heron yet. We just finished with Dog. And what's with "that bastard" Dog? I thought you were all Tong goons, through and through."

Snake glances around the mercs, his voice dropping to a low quiet rumble that vibrates oddly in Jim's chest, "Dog definitely lived up to his nickname. He was a rabid guard-dog who ran internal-ops. But not everyone is there by choice. Heron? She would never work willingly for monsters. Neither would I, if given a choice." His voice trails off, and his hand twitches, as if trying to coil around his teacup. "But it doesn't matter, we can't walk away without paying in blood." Snake grows quiet in thought. He glances around to make sure none of the gangsters are listening, and says quietly, "Fine. I will give up my prize." He deflates as he goes on, "Jim, you can walk free. But, please, find Heron."

Jim's head snaps to his captor, "Wait, did I hear you right? You bagged and beat me, and now you are going to let me go?"

"I'll give you my private file on Heron. Return her to me, and I'll help gut the Tong's intel ops. I'll have to keep watch as you do this, I hope you understand I can't trust people easily in my situation." Snake looks each of the Mercs in the face as they decide his fate. Fear for Heron's life, as well as his own, causes him to nervously sip tea.

"OK, but you don't get a cut of the job." Bert hoisted up his teacup toward Snake.

"That seems acceptable, and efficient." Haru agreed.

"I don't like this, but what the hell, it might save us a lot of ammo." Frank grudgingly agreed.

"Same money, less work! Sounds like a dream come true." Ricardo joins the salute.

Jackal crushes his tiny teacup in his huge metal mitts, "I'm fine with it, but one wrong move, and its boots and bags for the team, Snake."

They all look to Jim, "OK, OK, fine." Jim relented and held out his hands. "Can I get these frigging cuffs off now?"

6

"I can understand the cuffs for show, but why do I have to wear the bag?" Jim protests through a black bag as he is led off by his Tong captor to the parking lot of the Tea-house.

"Come on, Mr Hawkins, we need to keep this act maintained until you can get out of here." Snake chided quietly. "You can breathe okay, right?"

Jim snorts, "Oh, don't start to care about my well being now that I'm useful. Besides, I don't know where I am anyway, you bagged me to get me here."

"Security precautions, Mr Hawkins. I know how dangerous data is with someone as skilled as yourself. If you really want, I can take the bag and cuffs off after we leave. I will need time to plot and hopefully, you can find heron before they learn of my disloyalty." Jim stumbles along, being led by his captor away from the noise and bustle of a busy kitchen.

"We're here, Mr. Hawkins, duck your head." Snake says as he opens the door on his sleek, low-slung sports-car. He guides Jim into the low plush seat, taking care to keep him from hitting his bag-covered head. Jim sinks into the seat, and after a second, the seat inflates slightly and forms around him, warming to a comfortable temperature. As Snake gets in, the car rumbles to life. Snake punches in the route in the car's software, the car backs out and rolls off into the streets. Snake then removes the bag from Jim's head. The smiling face of the masked-Tong greets him again, flicking a pocket knife open in a flash, expectantly holding out his other hand. Jim grimaces as he holds out his zip-cuffed hands, the knife blade triggering a vision of scattered bodies and blood. *Dammit, Jim. Keep your mind together, not much more until freedom.* Snake cuts the ties off and throws them in the tiny back seat area.

"Is that better, Mr Hawkins? I hope my show of trust here will not go misplaced?" Snake says folding the knife with a click that echoes too intimately in the small cabin. Jim rubs his wrists, glancing at the back seat. Shopping bags from designer labels litter the backseat, lacy edges and sheer fabrics peeking out. *Expensive tastes, Feminine too. Probably for a girl-friend or maybe cover? This guy is full of questions.* Jim's mind is always crunching data, currently working to build an idea of the person he is being forced to work with. *I'm not entirely sure that Snake isn't going to pull a triple-play on me, so I need to keep my guard up and learn all I can.*

"So you keep a chip at this safe house on your own coworker? Why keep hard data on your own guys?" Jim asks, "Is it offline paranoia?

Snake chuckles quietly, before yielding a bit more, "I'm an intelligence operative. It's my job to know about everyone and trust very few. The bad part is, if you are good at your job, you find out all the things your bosses don't want to be known. Heron's like me, sold into working for the Tong. I found out about her acquisition and I found it appalling. I kept records of her and tried to assist her, but I haven't been able to give her the information she needs to be freed. I lack the means to do so without being watched."

"That's where mooks like us come into play, right, Snake?" Jim said, getting the idea of Snake's plan. "I can search without a Chinese hacker proxy watching and get the sweet pay-data, while you still look like you are doing your job. Is Heron worth the risk for you letting me go and possibly outing yourself?"

Snake pauses, "Yes, I will honor my agreement with you, and providing you do your end, we shall walk away hand-in-hand, all very happy."

"Sounds peachy. All the way until the Tong hit-squads come kicking down our collective doors. Either way, I am absolutely beat. What's the ETA on the safe-house?" Jim says with a yawn.

"The car says 30 minutes of traffic, best route."

"Good, you didn't need the bag on my head, I'm going to sleep until we get there. Consider it professional courtesy, I trust you not to geek me once I pass out."

Snake gave a quiet chuckle "You're safe in my grasp, Mr Hawkins, rest easy."

*That wording doesn't make me feel better; but I am too tired to care. I am warm, semi-dry, and this motion is draining. I'll just close my eyes for 30 and regroup.* Jim leaned back in the seat and was out before the next block rolled by.

Strange visions fill his mind, flashes of faces speaking in an ancient language, saying a name he recognizes, *Cihuapillicoatl*, the sudden whisper of the name pulls Jim from his sleep. He opens his eyes as they pull into the plastcrete block, up to the 3rd floor before parking. Jim stretches as the car pulls in, tiredness pulling at him after the short nap.

"I hope the rest was as peaceful as you were." Snake said, playfully mocking Jim.

"Well it was better than the black-outs between being tortured." Jim said through his teeth, glaring at his former captor.

Snake's grin fades. "Indeed. It was dirty business, but you understand, Mr Hawkins, just business. I needed to be sure that the information I earned from you was true. Without this happening, we could not have come to the point where you are being freed with me helping complete your job."

"I'll trust you when you are in the rear-view mirror. Or at least start trusting you more. Now, lead the way and let's get this chip. I could use a real chunk of sleep and a smoke before I get back on the 'net and all of that will take time." The car parks itself smoothly into a numbered parking spot and the engine cuts.

The doors of the car both pop open and Snake responds, "You can take some time to recover, Mr Hawkins, but don't expect me to just sit by and twiddle my thumbs while you work. Gods know what might be happening to Heron, so I will be keeping tabs on you in my free time, giving whatever assistance I can. You will not be leaving me in the rear-view, Jim. I will be there in the backseat."

Jim climbs out of the car, taking a second to get to his feet, Snake grabs some bags from the backseat before closing the doors on the car. The disguised gangster walks off, leading Jim from the poorly-lit parking-structure across a bridge to a large apartment-block. The block is run-down and showing its age with a state of general disrepair. Graffiti lines the halls, apartment doors are taped over for maintenance dated years before, never completed. Loud thumps from sub-woofers can be heard pulsing through the thin walls, covering shouts and other random noises. Jim has seen places like this before, it almost felt like his childhood. *It's hard to imagine this pretty-faced Tong gangster staying in this shit-hole, but here we are, I guess that makes it a good safe-house.* Eventually they walk to a dead end, coming to a door marked closed for repairs, Snake stops and starts punching in commands on the lock. After checking the halls, the electronic lock pops open and Snake pushes the door open, gesturing for Jim to enter. Jim walks into the dark apartment and Snake shuts the door behind him, its lock re-engaging as the door shuts.

The lights come on as Jim enters a walkway, bringing the clean and sparsely decorated

area into view. Jim walks into the front room of the apartment and marvels at its appearance. Appliances and furniture are decades out of date from anything modern. Items displayed in shelves lining a wall in the room showcase small items and knickknacks from earlier times. Some of the tech Jim remembers from his childhood back in the pre-wireless days. *Is this guy an old-tech hobbyist or has this place been abandoned this long?* Jim picks up a pre-matrix communications device and turns it over in his hands. *This thing alone has to be double or triple our age.*

Snake walks past Jim after messing with the door controls and apartment's control settings. He sees Jim appreciating the old trinkets and smiles. "Take a seat Mr Hawkins. I will retrieve the chip I promised and then we can talk details about this job."

Jim glances around the room, the only seating around is a set of leather chairs surrounding a small table with a lamp. Not synth-leather, he could smell the oils and natural scent to the plush seats filling the room. Jim walks over and plops into the cushion, feeling like he is melting as he sinks into the copious padding. *Okay so Snake likes nice things, old things, I should add. I can appreciate that, at least.* Jim could only wish for a cigarette and a scotch to add a nice touch to a day improving by the minute.

Snake returns after a few minutes, suit jacket and tie removed, with chip in hand. As the Tong sits next to Jim, he contemplates the chip in its protective case. Jim takes in the scene, as it seems Snake is absorbed in thought. *I can't read Snake's motives in this. Is this all a ploy? Is Heron a lost lover and that's why he's so interested, or is it really a shared fate? Why do I keep getting strange vibes from this guy? I guess with enough digging, and some luck, I can ask Heron.*

Jim clears his throat politely, getting Snake's attention and his focus back on the task at hand.

"With this chip, I believe you can track down Heron. This is a dossier on her and some of her closest associates." The Tong holds the chip out, hesitating at first.

Jim grabs the chip and the masked Tong's hand locks down on him like a vice. "What the hell, Snake." Jim trails off as he hears an alluring voice whisper a word he somehow knows to be a name, *Cihuapillicoatl*. Jim tries to pull his arm away, flinching more from the whisper than the grasp.

The Tong stares, worry bleeding through the velvet, "Please Jim. All of our fates, yours too, are in these talented hands. We've done terrible things on their orders. I hope that you give us the chance to atone for our past, however bad it might have been between us."

Jim's gut twists and he shakes his head slowly. *First these mental flashes, and now a guilt-trip heavier than any my mom threw my way. I never could say no to a good redemption arc.* Jim stops trying to pull away from Snakes grasp and Snake releases him. "IF Heron is still around, I will find her. I'll have agents scraping IDs and we'll get location data in hours. If you could keep the Tongs chasing shadows, we might be able to get this done in three, maybe four days."

"Call me skeptical, but impressed. You're not the average code jockey, are you?" Snake gave a raised eyebrow with his surprised response.

"That's what my friends tell me. So once I get any location data, what's the plan?" Jim asks, tucking the data chip in his pocket.

"I will come and meet up with you to go over the data and plot our next move. The Tong cannot know I am working with you so I will have to change my disguise."

"Change your disguise? Brother, you look so unique I could pick you out of a line up from 200 meters. What, you got a fat-suit and some gym-clothes?" Jim says with a laugh.

"Jim," Snake pauses, a noticeable raise the pitch of his voice, with no sign of his accent, "while you may be a computer-hacker wizard, I am an actual wizard." Snake said with a smug ear-to-ear grin. Jim narrows his eyes and nods. This confirms his building suspicion that the Tong is magical. The unusual strength, the silly mask, no known description, and a pension for old crap. "It seems you are as consummate and professional at your game as I am at mine, Jim. You won't recognize me next time you see me, so I will give you my contact, and I expect to hear from you soon. I will be waiting, and watching, little prey." As Snake addresses him, he can feel a pulse of magical power and a brief flash of serpentine features on the Tong. The Golden glowing eyes behind Snake's mask bore holes into Jim's soul, becoming visible through the mask for a flicker, their bright glow leaving spots in his vision after the flash. *Friggan magicians, what the hell am I getting myself into?*

## 7

The ride was quiet on the way back. Snake seemed to have said his piece and was lost in thoughts and emotions. Jim pulls his comm-link up as Snake drives away, types and sends a message to his merc chat-group. "Back at my un-safehouse. I have the chip, but I need some rest before I can dig into this. Send backup to my location, just in case." Jim walks into the foyer of his apartment, checking his reflection in the glass panels on the walls for anyone following him. He hits the elevator call button and a door smoothly opens for him. He would normally wait and check to see who from his merc group is going to show up, but he doesn't care at this point. He is too tired and beaten to protest. *My apartment safe-house is potentially burned, at least by Snake. Not my first burned safe-house, but I like this set-up. Lugging my gear around is a pain so I have to wait to move for now.*

The elevator speeds up to his floor, giving a soft hum as the doors open and Jim is out, moving on auto pilot. He stops a few steps away when he sees a note left on his door. *Hiya Bimmy, I shut your door for you after your friends left. It looks like you guys had one crazy party. Hope you are well. -Ms. Feldstein.* Jim frowns. *I hope they didn't give my nice, old neighbor any problems. She is always a sweetheart to me, and I don't want to drag her into this.* He puts his thumb on the electronic door lock and it pops open after a second of processing, sending Jim a greeting and a series of warnings. All his entry sensors and alarms are triggered and send notifications as he connects to the apartment's systems. Jim walks through the searched apartment, past the open drawers, contents covering the floor, and heads to his office. *Let's see how good these guys really are.* Jim walks to a small glass stand full of trinkets and collectibles and moves it away from the wall. Behind the stand's lit base, Jim slides the baseboard back and reveals his hidden compartment, still intact. *Well, at least score one for me. I still have some of the Tong's data and those chips I don't remember making. Work for another time, I guess. Task at hand, Jim, one problem at a time.* Jim walks over to his cyberdeck, and notices the chips in it were pulled by the Tongs. He still has his rig and back up programs, but they took what little he had pulled up on Snake, stealing some of his pay-data. He got comfortable in his office-chair, laying the back down almost flat, and plugged into his 'deck. His eyes show warnings as the cyberdeck boots up, it needs to have a diagnostic run on it, alarms showing signs of intrusion. Jim doesn't want any ride-alongs when he starts his dig through the net. His mind dives into his deck, a sinking feeling taking hold of Jim as the rendered world comes to life around him. Jim relaxes, back at home in his virtual penthouse, his finely suited

Avatar standing in his domain. He checks around his connections and linked data stores. There are signs of tampering, logs with sections missing, blank names for file access. *Those Tong bastards have jumped in and messed with my rig. I guess that buys me some time until I can dig into the file.* He sends out a pack of anti-virus programs, all self-made, to hunt out anything that might be left behind. The programs, resembling maids, start by cleaning his stores, and as they do, they search his entire system for bugs and mark them. He loads his agent program, a loyal butler, to run an algorithm backing up to an off-site chip and recover his system to pre-attack conditions. His agent processing the list of commands gives a salute and begins opening prompts and working at blinding speeds. With his penthouse control returning to his hands, Jim could sleep for a scant few hours while the system completes its work. He logs out, rising back out of the synthetic world of his kingdom, back to his real body. The pain of the last few days returns to Jim's mind, reminding him of the downgrade going from his powerful avatar to his actual tired form. He checks his 'link and sees the messages in his merc-group. It looks like he will be entertaining Ricardo, the Aztlan cyber-ninja. At least he was one of the more "human" of their small group. Jim messaged Ricardo and got his ETA. Ricardo was a pretty dependable guy, all in all. Jim could count on him to bring some food and maybe even a few beers when he woke up. Jim sends him a temporary access code and stumbles off to his bedroom. Ignoring the tossed room, Jim strips and flops onto his bed, the room taking his preferred environment settings and adapting the room's temperature and lighting. Jim sets a 3 hour alarm and can actually relax for the first time in days. With a dose of pain killers, it only takes seconds for Jim to feel Seattle fade away from existence around him.

"Carajo! Where are your pants, pendejo? Oh, there they are." Jim jumps up suddenly to Ricardo, the lab-coat wearing ninja, already in his room trying to turn his alarm off. "That thing has been going off for 15 minutes, Jim. Now that you are up, get yourself cleaned up and join me in the kitchen." Jim checks the time in his vision as Ricardo walks back out of the bedroom covering his eyes and swearing at naked Jim. *0230. As good a time as any for my line of work.* Jim's body protests any movements he makes, giving sharp pain as he stretches and rolls out of bed. His few steps to the shower is a torturous death march. The hot water hurts at first, but after his last sob-shower, Jim appreciates the relief in his muscles. Finishing in the bathroom, he pulls on jeans and a hoodie, his standard fare. His routine attire feels welcome after spending 4 days in the same gym clothes. *I am torching those clothes for sure. Clean or not, there is no saving them after what happened in them.* Jim shuddered and shook his head. He pulls on a pair of boots and grabs a pack of smokes from a carton on the ground. Jim curses and quickly gives up on finding a lighter. *There's fire in the kitchen for sure.* He stomps off to find a lighter or his single burner in the kitchen.

Ricardo is seated in the kitchen, food bags scattered across the table in front of him. Jim sees Ricardo is splitting up the orders into different piles. Jim lights his cigarette at the stove and as he finishes, Ricardo turns and grins at Jim, seemingly proud at the spread he has provided. "Alright Jimmy, we got Felipe's, Don Felipe's, The Golden Palace, The Imperial Palace, Sushi-boss, and Stuffer-Shack. There is enough take-out here to kill a troll, and enough beers to pickle him. I think you earned first pick after a few days torture, perro. Have at it." Ricardo says with an almost game-show host tone. Jim appreciates the lighthearted joking, but the gesture was actually nice for Ricardo to do for him. "Thanks Ric." Jim said, feeling a small bit of comradery with this augmented cyber-commando. Jim picks over some of the trays of take-out, loads up a pile of greasy goodness, before leaving his pile on the kitchen table and grabbing a tall six-pack of local made brews out of the fridge Ricardo had left to chill. Ricardo was an angel sent from Meso-America, a true brother to

all runners on the street. Jim pulls a beer off the pack and holds the cold can to his head, and walks back to the table.

Ricardo laughs as he sees Jim walking up and grabs a beer himself, "You should drink these, man, they work better this way." Ricardo pops the beer open and takes a swig. Jim, not wanting to argue with a smart man, cracks his open and drinks half. Bliss in a can. Jim can remember hating the taste a few years before. *It is strange how quick things have changed since I moved here.* Jim had started running the streets in his teens right after he moved into Seattle proper. The transition had quickly matured him, leaving him no room for childish habits or behavior of his past. Since his late teens, he had made it so he had to fend for himself. Keeping his only family in the dark and out of harm's way of his escapades, he had no training wheels. The only family he had to rely on now was his pack of mercs. "OK, seriously, I want to hoist the rest of this to you guys in the crew. You guys put it on the line to get me back and didn't screw it up. Thanks again, Ric." Jim salutes his fellow merc, who joins him in his salute, gives a "Salud" before they both drink the cans empty and grab more. Ricardo tries to fill Jim in on what he missed during his captivity from the mercenaries side, but Jim focuses on filling his empty belly. Jim and Ricardo eat, drink, smoke and shit-talk for an hour before Jim tosses his empty plate and makes a pot of soy-coffee. It was time for Jim to stim up and get busy. Drinking a few beers was nothing compared to the stims he would be on the next few days. Ricardo claps Jim on the back "Good luck in there, perro, I knew you were tougher than you looked."

"I wish I could say the same about you Ricardo, but you're too pretty." Jim poked back, both of them laughing. Even Ricardo knew that when Jim plugged in, he might not be betting his body, but his brain was still on the line. Messing up while dodging intrusion-countermeasures on a private net means a burnt 'deck and possibly a brain-dead hacker. The two professionals got comfortable, one to plug into his rig and start a long and dangerous process, the other to guard his unconscious comrade.

As Jim got everything prepped before he dove into the cyberdeck, he pounded soy-caff, trying to get as much of the joy-juice in his blood before his long trek into cyberspace. Jim's agent signals it's work complete and Jim dives into his rig, a fresh and cleaned up version of his system. He checks his custom-made suite of programs, his most up-to-date build, each program resembles a member in his private staff. *Connection speeds, OK, connection to data-stores, check, all programs showing green. Time to open this file from Snake and see what we have to go on.* The file in the chip was out of place in the modern penthouse, resembling an old-world safe with a combination dial. Jim appreciates the odd touch, using a form of encryption to bring about an familiar old-world feel to the chip. Jim inputs the numbers as given by Snake, turns a large arm and the safe lock clanks open. The door automatically swings open to reveal a large manila folder. *Fine, I'll admit it, Snake has class.* Jim relents as he reaches in and grabs the folder. He quickly scans the folder for any data-mines, viruses, or trackers. *All green, so far. No traps, no tricks.* Jim hesitates, then accesses the file. A wall of documents opens before his vision as he cracks open the folder. It starts centered on a young white-haired, Chinese lady, dubbed "Heron" and then expands like a wall of a conspiracy theorist. As the wall expands, it shows connections between Heron and known associates, organizations, safe-houses, and a single family member, her brother, who is, according to the file, kidnapped. The amount of data is immense and covers a map of connections between people and organizations and a map of Seattle with various locations of interest marked. As the wall finishes expanding, Jim's virtual jaw is dropping. He looks over the entirety of the file, a snapshot

of a person in data form. *This is pretty similar to what I do, but in the real-world and with way more attention to detail. If I could get data like this on anyone, there would be no way to hide from me.* Jim starts by taking sections of the wall as images and sends them to his agent with orders to add as many of the people and organizations to the map of Seattle as possible. The agent salutes and starts its wind-up of processing, pulling up windows faster than Jim can read them and starts building a map with possible paths of travel to and from known safe-houses. Jim returns to the data and starts to note associates and their locations, he would be most interested in hunting down Heron's closest lieutenants, and finding them. Highlighting names of his biggest suspects, Jim checks the map his agent is making and queries the target names. After the agent processes the information it shows the location of a few lucky individuals. *There we go, here is my first list of targets. Time to get the mercs hunting and get the data-train moving.* As the agent finishes his task, the map is complete and the known travel of all targets are shown as paths on the map. *Time to start hacking some cameras, how about some shwarma-houses, and some pawn shops in the area?* Jim selects his first target and sends a search program dressed as a maid out to find any mom-and-pop businesses on the known routes used by him. After a few ticks the maid reappears from behind and highlights a few buildings on the routes. Jim searches for site connections for the business and only turns up one hit. *I guess this will have to work. Good start. First camera for first target done flawlessly. Now I need to find about 12 more cameras. Going over the footage will eat more time. I need to speed this up.* Jim knows, even at the increased pace he goes on the net, his task is a marathon of hacking, data compiling and coordination. Adding that lives of people are on the line forces Jim to go as slow and careful as time will allow. *I am going to need some more coffee for sure.*

Using stealth and manipulation over brute force attacks, Jim and his party of programs sneak through the net. Their mission grinds on for what feels like days in the high speeds of the net. Every system requires the same tasks, but with the sheer variety and customization of modern software, each system requires a different approach. Surrounded by his various programs working diligently, Jim grinds on, sweat streaks off his real body from the effort. With each mark he leaves on a system, his notoriety increases, making the work more and more dangerous as time passes. His work near complete, Jim dashes from system to system, laying low from the watchful eyes of the net's overlords. The Federal agents in their perfect black suits watch the net tirelessly, their powers untouchable. With the heat Jim has on him from hacking so many systems, staying mobile and changing nodes buys him the time he needs out of their sight. "Target match 90%, confirmed repeat visits to location" Jim's agent salutes and sends a window his way. Jim stops his movement and grabs the window, seeing a video scroll across it. He sees a small car pull into a parking structure and park. A large woman exits the car and the poor hatchback creaks and rises inches up. The target looks to be a match for Heron's bodyguard. The large-framed woman resembled a walking vending machine with her large, obvious cyber-enhanced body filling every walkway as she walks to a door of a condo. *Damn, I feel sorry for the suspension in that car. We shouldn't try a normal snatch and grab with her. I think she might beat our poor boys to a pulp.* Jim marks the target on his list, sending an image and the location of the safe-house to his merc-group. He does a quick net search and finds the building advertises protection by a third-party professional security company on their scream-sheet. *This makes things harder, but not impossible.* "This one looks dangerous. I'll ride along, and call in some extra muscle. Meet up at Frank's" Jim saves the footage and logs off the net. Retreating to his penthouse, Jim stores his new data and checks his contacts from his 'link. *John Parker is always reliable for heavy-lifting. That Jamaican war-fighter can punch out a bull and*

*roast it. He owes us from last time, too. I hope Haru doesn't harbor a grudge from that shrapnel-peppering.* "Parker, I know you are always looking for work. Hit me up if you're free, I got someone I need to talk to and I think you can help." The Jamaican responds quickly, "Praise, Jim. G'won send meeting location, I'm ya man." *Now we just need a safe-house, Vlad can help with that. I'll ask him for somewhere seedy and private to talk with our subject.* "Vlad, I need to "entertain" a guest to track down our current assignment. Assistance would be greatly appreciated and reimbursed for." He waits a few ticks while Vlad sends his message back, "Mr. Jim. For you, my "A" team? No problem. After good work with Dog job, I will send you location. Give Smiles my greetings."

Jim saves the location to his map and starts a search on the location. It was an industrial cleaning business before Vlad purchased the property. Now the building is simply marked "private", a poorly maintained front for interrogations, torture, or worse. With his first leg of hacking complete Jim logs out. As Jim rises out of his virtual dominion, he can feel the effects of his work on his body. *Damn, I probably should clean up. 12 hours in the chair can make a guy pretty sore, and ripe.* Jim creeps back to the bedroom on wobbly legs to do the grind all over again.

## 8

The mercs arrive at Frank's yard and park their vehicles inside the fenced workshop. As they assemble, they unload their personal bags into a waiting van. Jim looks over the group as they prep their gear, nervous chat keeps them moving as they work. Frank is the wheel-man on this job, he checks the van before going over his gear. John Parker checks and re-checks his weapons, non-lethal injector rounds loaded and ready with his AK for back-up. Smiles the man-shark stares at the group with his black, soulless eyes and waits. *I guess ambush predators don't need to prep much gear.* Jim addresses the group of mercs as they finish. "We know what we need to do, guys. This is a snatch and grab, but with a pretty capable target. Our subject is visibly cybered to the gills and is a bodyguard by trade. The rest of the team is setting up cameras and tailing other subjects so we will be short-handed and have no back-up if things go south. I will try to hack what I can when we get there to help. Once we get the subject, get them to the van and we roll to this location," Jim sends Vlad's safe-house location. "What's the security like at the grab-site?" Frank grunted. Jim frowns "Pretty good actually. This isn't some slum mass-hab apartment block. There is a security company doing protection for the building and in the parking structure. That's why I'm going with you. I'll run cover for as long as possible and delay any calls for help."

"If it was an easy day, I wouldn't be here, right?" John Parker shrugs and jokes. "Let's go earn our pay." Parker slaps Jim on the back and they all pack into the van. Jim grins as he buckles himself into the van, "Thanks John, just remember who to shoot this time, right?"

As the team approaches the large building, Jim partially dives into his rig, overlaying the virtual over the real world. He sends his programs to work, scanning the structure, looking for intrusion counter-measure systems, and keeping an eye out for their target. Nodes popped up in the structure, all end-points in private networks. Dammit, *the wireless signal in that massive parking structure is hell. I bet the defensive networks will be sectioned and wired. I will need to get closer to the building to be able to connect.* Frank pulls the van up to the parking structure's entrance, and a manned security booth with a car-barrier blocks their path. "Are we going to play nice, or ice this guy?" Frank grunts as he signals to turn into the structure. The gang waits quietly in the van as

Frank pulls a pistol out and holds it out of view under the door. He pulls up to the security booth and the door opens. A cloud of smoke pours out like a wall as a figure walks out of the haze. John Parker perks up, sniffing the air, sensing a familiar skunky aroma. An old-school Rasta with dreadlocks to the floor wearing aviator sunglasses and a shabby security guard uniform walks up to the van, pausing to exhale an ungodly amount of smoke as he comes to the window. "Ya pay fer da hour or fer da day, mon?"

"What the hell did you just say to me?" Frank rudely grunts, from the driver's seat, quietly pulling the hammer back on his pistol. "Allow me, Frank. I an I can reason with this man," John Parker messages as he whips out a golden cigarette case and pulls out a hand rolled spliff. John holds out his cyberarm past Frank, tenderly holding the J and says "Hey, old-Rasta, We just need to visit a friend. This is straight from the homeland to you. Can you take a break and get right with me?" The old Rasta lowers his aviators, showing his bloodshot eyes as he stares at the spliff, and nods, ordering the barrier out of the van's path. "Let's burn it, young-Rasta." Frank defuses the situation as he hands the joint to the old Rasta and de-cocks his pistol as he lets out a slow exhale. John Parker exits the rear of the van and walks off with the guard, smoking and joking as they walk away from the structure. Frank shakes his head as he pulls the van in and parks in guest parking. "Damn druggies."

Jim checks his abysmal connection in the van and sighs. "I am gonna have to get closer to work on the systems in the garage. Stay here and keep watch for our friend." Jim checks his rig in his satchel and exits the van, walking towards the conjoined living structure. As he gets closer and his signal improves, Jim looks around for a place to hide himself while he works. Jim lays down between two pillars and a parked rental van, hiding his body from view, and fully dives into the net. The virtual world actually resembles a simplified version of the real world, Jim rises to his feet in the parking structure. He orders his programs to action, scanning the systems attached between the condos and the parking structure looking for routes to the controlling servers. His secretary locates a server-room underneath the monolithic structure of the living spaces. The system is being monitored by roaming protection software with links to the security company watching off-site. *This is not going to be easy. They have back up off-site and are monitoring the systems currently.* Shit. Jim's spy-master program covers him with a smoke-screen stealth app and Jim starts his way towards the living space's server-room. The building's server looks like an impressive Monolith Black tower with imposing red-glowing windows, standing tall over the systems around it. Avatars come and go from the tower, guests checking the net from their rooms, moving through the structure's glowing red windows. Jim's target is below the structure, into the depths below as he follows the connections across a bridge to enter the tower. He waits as a roving security program patrols by and glides to a lift system. Jim pulls out his skeleton-key program and inserts it into the lift's access panel. After a few nail-biting seconds of probing the lock with the key, Jim is able to turn the key, lighting up an additional panel in the lift with more floors. Jim finds the lowest basement level and hits the button. *No sense in messing about, the best systems always hide in the basement.* Jim checks his spy-master program's stealth before the door opens at the bottom basement of the structure. The room resembles a high-tech security room, monitors lining all walls with a low desk in the center. A single guard virtually sits at the desk, casually monitoring a rapidly changing security monitor and a vid-stream showing porn so raunchy, it made Jim blush. *I can't decide if this is good or bad. I might be able to make a loop of camera footage while he isn't watching if I work fast enough, but if he notices me working or scrolling the feeds, it's a fight.* Jim

creeps up on the guard, waiting for his moment to move. As the vid-stream the guard is watching gets particularly disgusting, Jim sends his spy-master program into action, using its sleaze functions, it stealth-fully approaches and plugs into the desk's system. After a few seconds, it reports back successfully and creeps back. Jim is able to grab the controls of the monitoring system from the guard. He waits again for the guard to be distracted and he starts recording on all parking cameras. Jim can feel the pressure as the seconds tick by painfully slowly, waiting to get enough footage on enough of the parking structure to loop without showing obvious patterns. Jim stops the recording as the vid-stream the guard is watching ends. As the guard picks his next debauchery, Jim selects the recordings for the parking cameras and starts the feed-loop. Jim backs away from the security room, and stalks his way back to the lift. *That was lucky. I thought I was going to have to force-dump that guard, but boredom and net connection wins every time. As long as he doesn't notice my login, I can watch the cams from my body.* Jim retreats back to his body and sets up the cameras in his vision. "Cams are ours, I have the internal ones on loop. I'll keep an eye out for our target, get ready" He messages to the group. Confirmations come across the net, as well as well-wishes from some of the teammates on other tasks. *Time to hurry up and wait for the target.*

## 9

Only one bathroom-break is needed before the same small hatchback Jim is looking for struggles into the parking structure and up a ramp, into the condo's private parking section. Jim messages the team about the target's arrival and pulls up their live-feeds, integrating it into his vision. John Parker is waving to his old-Rasta friend walking back to the structure, as Jim sees from each of the merc's points of view. Frank drives the van slowly up to the private parking area, with Smiles getting ready at the door of the van to jump out and pounce. Jim goes back to the camera feeds and watches as the target hatchback parks in its spot. "Time to move, guys. If the target gets inside the building, this job gets way harder." Acknowledgments spring across Jim's vision, the team is moving to converge on the target. Frank parks the van a few spots away from the target, as John Parker runs to get into place on the second floor. John Parker exits the stairwell, coming out near their target and pulls his suppressed large-bore pistol out of his jacket. As John Parker aims his pistol at the large cybered woman, Jim sees alarms popping up in his vision. He quickly checks on the camera system and watches the guard stop the loop Jim set up. *Fuck! Talk about the worst time to do your job!* Jim watches the guard snap to attention at his desk and start punching commands into the console. Jim wipes all of the local logs on the system, disables communication with the building and logs out quickly. "We need to move this along! They know about the loop on the cams! I'm bailing and heading to you!" Jim messages as he logs out to his meat-body and stumbles to his feet. He keeps the live-feeds of his teammates running, as Jim tries to calmly move to the next floor of the structure. John's pistol coughs as he fires into the Tong's back, rounds thud into the target's armored clothes, spraying their toxins onto the skin underneath. The huge woman grunts from the pain of the impacts, tumbles and spins around faster than Jim can see, pulling out a pistol of her own as she takes cover. John Parker's face goes into panic as he keeps firing, seeing the woman take multiple shots and not go down. Lights start flashing in the structure as the alarms spring to life. The Tong bodyguard blind-fires her pistol over the car she is hiding behind, John Parker dives to behind a pillar to avoid the fire. "Might need some help with this one. She already took a few hits, not going down." John Parker messages the group as he rolls away

from fire hitting near his head. "Flush her out of cover, John Parker, and I'll take care of her." Frank sends to the group as he slowly backs the van out of its spot, careful not to rev the engine too much. John Parker reloads as he moves around his cover. As the fire from the bodyguard dies down, John Parker sprints to within a couple cars of the Tong. "GO!" John Parker messages as he starts firing his pistol under the car towards the feet of the Tong. She springs over the car, out of cover and into the driveway still trying to aim her pistol at John Parker. In the height of adrenaline and focus on her task, Heron's bodyguard doesn't notice the van pulling up the driveway until after she launches herself. She raises an arm to shield her head right before the collision sends her spinning and her pistol flying. Before John Parker can send his message of thanks to Frank, a kind woman's voice calls out across the alarm system "Attention, on-site security has armed the active protection system. All guests and staff are ordered to stay put and stay low. Sentry turrets are currently securing the grounds before additional security teams will arrive to secure the building. Thank you and have a safe day."

"Fuck! Get to the van now!" Jim messages his group as he runs for cover in the stairwell. Frank stops the van, leaving Smiles to pick up the heavy bodyguard and lug her into the back. Mechanical whining sounds can be heard and Jim pokes his head out into the next floor. He looks around and can see the van stopped about 60 feet ahead of him, John Parker sprinting as sentry-guns drop smoothly out of armored bays built into the structure. Jim starts running as fast as he can towards the van, hearing the warnings of the sentry-guns as they come online. The closest sentry wheels its gun into position and its speaker gives a robotic warning "Attention suspect, lay down or you will be fired upon." Jim panics as he processes the sudden warning, but it only motivates him to run faster. The sentry tracks Jim and fires, bullets whizzing by him as he starts screaming in panic. As John Parker jumps in the van, it starts driving away, Jim screams louder and somehow runs even faster towards the open side-door. Smiles pokes his head out the door and notices the screaming hacker. Smiles reaches out his huge arm, Jim jumps, grabs the meaty hand and is yanked screaming into the van. Bullets ping off armor panels on the van as Frank whips the van around in a 180-degree spin and peels-out towards the exit. The van speeds down a ramp, tires squealing as Frank whips the vehicle towards the exit. Bullets continue to crash into the armor plating, hammering the sides as they speed away. Barriers slowly rise from the ground surrounding the small guard shack. Frank floors the throttle and aims the van at the entrance, noticing the barrier is failing on that side. The van drifts past the security-booth and off into the street. Frank hits the van's horn and counter-steers to avoid hitting passing cars as he regains control and speeds away. After a few minutes of aggressive, fast driving, Frank slows it down and changes the van's digital logos for a new disguise. Jim and John Parker look over their target, who is out, but still breathing. They confiscate all her belongings and prepare her for transport, cuffs on her hands, bag on her head, as they drive to Vlad's hide-away.

The team rides across the city into an sprawling industrial park as they near their destination. Frank smoothly pulls in and parks his van inside a fenced parking area for the run-down industrial safe-house. Light rain taps on the window as Jim checks the streets for activity. There are the occasional workers on break milling about in groups, with small shifts of people shuffling to and from their cars. Jim prays the privacy screens on the fences will keep workers from noticing the

mercs move a limp Tong's body inside. Jim jumps out of the van and pulls up his comm-link in his vision. *Time to stop the paranoia and send Snake a message, I shouldn't need too long in there.* "Target bagged. One of Heron's bodyguards. Meet us at my location for questioning and pick up." Jim tags his location as he walks through the door with Frank and Smiles in tow carrying the heavy goon. The rest of the team had swept the safe house for bugs, traps and set up defenses around the building while Jim's team was grabbing their captive. Jim feels confident enough walking around with this much firepower around him, so he finds a safe corner and checks his link. He gets a message pop-up from Snake as he watches various news feeds. "I'll message when I arrive. Keep them alive until I get there, please?" Jim snorts in indignation and then remembers the beatings previous Tong got from Smiles and the other mercs. *Absolutely savage, I hope I never end up in hits like those.* Jim goes through the Tong bodyguard's items, finds her comm-link and plugs his rig into the device. Jim sends orders to his butler agent, who salutes and starts his task of cracking and decryption the Tong's 'link. *This will take some time, but until our guest is awake, I might as well get it done.* He messages his merc chat-group as he bags the rest of the items and waits in the break area with Frank, "Is our friend up and ready?" The team is quick to check up on their captive, Jackal uses his medical skills to make sure none of the physical trauma done is life-threatening, and cuffs the Tong to a chair in a trashed office. Jim gets a thumbs up emoji message from Jackal and heads over to the office where the goon is being held. Ricardo checks the captive's ties and pulls a gag from the gangster's mouth as Jim enters the room. Jim nods to the two mercs, who have their captive flanked and facing away from the door. Heron's goon stares stone-faced at Jim as he walks into view. He can see the beaten Tong has a little desperation in her eyes, but the Tong keeps her jaw locked and eyes fixed on Jim's. *I wonder if I kept it together half as much as this lady? It's funny how a few days change and now I'm the one interrogating someone beaten and dragged away.*

Jim sighs at the thought and starts his con. "Alright, lady. You don't know who I am, but I am your best and easiest shot at getting out of this without a toe-tag." Jim smirks, knowing he looks pretty beaten himself. "I just need a few questions answered, hopefully without having to ask too hard." Jim points his thumb to Jackal, still heavily armored and armed, with a Ballistic mask hiding his features. Jackal pounds his club into his large cyberhand, making a loud metal-on-metal clank. The goon and Jim flinch at the sound. The Tong responds after recovering her composure. "I don't really know how I could help you, I work for a publicity company." Jim puts up his hand to cut the large woman off but she talks over him. "Chinese cul—" Jackal knocks the back of her chair with his baton to get her attention. Jim goes on, "Just fuck'n stop it. We aren't some corp-cops or some government agency. You don't have rights, we don't have rules. We only have bosses who pay us and need things. You, chummer, have some information we need, now. We know you work for the Tong. You work for their internal-affairs group." The Tong's eyes narrow. "The publicity group is a front for your gang activities. We know you work for Heron, so cut the shit, I am working on a time table. People, including your own gang members, are starting to get worried about the organization." Jim can feel the sweat building on his hands. *I know this play is dangerous, but using Snake's knowledge of this operation and backing could help me get more out of this Tong.*

"So you have been hired by members of the organization? Why would they reach out to outside means when we have our own?" The Tong asks, suspicious of the obvious outsider.

"And you will just have to ask yourself, who gave you up so easily? Now back to my interests and why we are here." Jim cuts the waste of time off quickly. "I am here because someone

is looking for your boss. Rumor is they are missing or at least haven't been seen in days. When was the last time you saw them?"

"So you do know someone in the organization." The goon hesitates before going on, "That information is supposed to be a guarded secret by her closest lieutenants. Well, if we are working on the same side, I'll spill it. I was supposed to pick her up three days ago to help with security for our annual walk-through and she was not at her home. We have been covering for her absence the last few days trying to keep everything working. I was not around her when she disappeared, it had to have been after I dropped her off the night before. She has not responded to my messages or calls for updates."

*Fuck.* Jim grumbles. "Do you know who she might have been with before she disappeared? Any whispers in chats about what went down? Someone has to know in her inner-circle."

"I have only heard rumors from other members. Like being called in for promotion, or worse. I don't have access to her schedule, but one of her close advisors could probably tell you exactly what she was doing when she didn't report back. You should go ask them, I told you what I know. If you really are working with us, you should let me go."

"Oh, don't you worry about others, I was your nice option, your next interrogator is arriving shortly and will get everything I didn't get out of you. Hopefully what you told me will line up with what they get, and hey, maybe you don't end up in a carpet on the bottom of Puget Sound!" The Tong swears at Jim and struggles against her ties, but relents after a thump from Ricardo. Jim sees a message notification pop-up in his vision. "I just parked and I'm walking up now. Please, don't shoot." *Snake has arrived, time to go greet our Tong guest.* Jim smiles "Well, it looks like our time is up, if you have anything you would like to say before I leave, now is your chance." Jim gets up and heads to the door, ignoring the gangster's swears and protests, knowing his good-cop could only get him so far without a bad-cop.

Jim walks to the side exit of the safe house, pausing before he hits the door. The rest of the Mercs were either hanging out in the break area in the safe-house, or were guarding locations around the building. *Better not surprise anyone on guard-duty.* Jim messages the mercenaries before walking out of the safe-house. "Our guest is here, I'm going out to meet them, hold your fire, please."

"No Guarantees." Bert replies from his post in the building across the street. His large-caliber rifle is not visible from his third story hide, but Jim knows Bert is up there watching. Jim pushes the door open and walks out to the street corner to wait for Snake. He hurries to some cover from the drizzling rain out on the street corner, pulling out a cigarette and lighter on the way. "Heya Jim. Can I bum a cigarette?" A husky, feminine voice rings out like music behind Jim. He flinches at the voice, recalling the smooth, alluring tone from his dream and spins around quickly. Jim can only stare jaw-agape, shocked at the sight of the tall form behind him. An almost 2 meter tall, tan-skinned Latina elf with golden snake-eyes, and long white hair, smiles down at him from under her umbrella. Her long, exaggerated limbs shimmer with scales patterned in tans and gold, her body painted in a green form-fitting modern Qipao, ending just low enough to keep on-lookers enticed. Jim's face flushes, not being at eye level with the taller woman didn't help. *Wait a minute, that face is familiar somehow.* He is frozen in place thinking hard as it dawns on him. *No way is that Snake's disguise!* Jim whispers the name as it flashes through his brain, "Cihua-something" Snake reaches out and takes the lit cigarette from Jim's hand, frozen in place after lighting it. "Here, take

one of mine. I've been meaning to replace what we burned through." She says holding out a pack with a wry smile, her golden eyes flickering between regret and playfulness. Jim slowly reaches for a cigarette and lights it, eyes wide as he takes a drag. "You look shaken, Jim. Does this form unsettle you?" Snake says with a smile spreading too-wide across her face, looking serpentine as she exhales smoke towards him. She bats her eyes at the shaken hacker. "Or is it just me?"

"Yeah, magic still freaks me out, man." Jim finally responds as he glances over Snake's current form. He can tell she relishes his discomfort at the situation, bouncing happily with a wide smug smile on her face. He shakes his head and exhales, "So is this just magic or is this real? I would like to get an idea who I'm working with. Especially someone who has beaten, bathed and dressed me."

"Oh, Jim," Snake purrs as she brushes Jim's blushing cheek. Scales briefly glow as she lingers close to him for a beat too long. "It didn't bother you when I was, otherwise. But now, seeing me like this," She slowly backs up, "does a woman's strength unsettle you, or excite you?" Jim gets a notification from Bert in his 3rd story hide, "Is this business or personal? I'm going to shoot that hooker if she touches you again."

"Hold your fire, Bert. That's not a prostitute, it's Snake." Jim messages back, not wanting to make a scene into a crime scene. "Let's get you inside, Mr. Snake, before you attract anymore attention with your ass hanging out in the street."

"Ha!" Snake slaps Jim's arm playfully, prompting a red-dot to appear on her torso for a few seconds. "I might act like I don't see, but now I KNOW you were looking. That's half of a good disguise, Jim, controlling unwanted attention. But, if you really have to know, this is more real than when you saw me before." Jim wasn't sure which was worse, him being man-handled by her, or whatever she did to him that he was too drugged up to remember.

He needed to get her back to the safe-house without everyone on the street noticing and ignore escalating threatening messages from Bert. "Coming back with Snake, no shooting please." Jim messages as he finishes his cigarette and starts to walk back with his former captor. As he glances around, the eyes of every man on the street follow the large elf. "Wait up, Jimmy." Snake loudly calls out as she tosses her cigarette butt in a trash-can and follows after Jim. He can feel himself turning red with embarrassment of the act, but he still stops and waits for Snake. As she catches up with him, she latches on to his side and cuddles down on the smaller man, smothering him with affection, making it a show for the audience. Jim looks around shooting glares at any onlookers, trying to play his part in this sudden act and leads her off towards the industrial safe-house. As he opens the door and walks in with Snake locked on his arm, Frank's weapon is quickly pointed at them.

"Whoa whoa, I thought I messaged you." Jim protests as he puts his one free hand up and puts himself in front of Snake. "What the hell, Jim?" Snake panics as she grabs his arm tight and ducks behind him. Frank grunts back "Who the hell is the knife-ear, Jim? That ain't no Snake." It dawned on Jim, Snake's current disguise is going to be a problem for the aged military man.

Frank has a pretty rocky military background. He didn't really walk away from it as much as he crawled away at some point. There was an incident he rarely speaks about, and when he does, it's always about the elves. He will never forgive the elves for the good men they took at sea, and for taking his legs. *I need to smooth this out now before it becomes a problem.* "C'mon! It's a friggin disguise, Frank. God-damned magic or something, best I can tell. Snake can't be seen working with us and I'd say this gorgeous elf is a pretty convincing disguise."

"You're damned right, I can smell the incense and patchouli oil from here." Frank's rifle didn't move an inch off Snake's center mass, still hidden behind Jim. "Leave it be Frank, Snake isn't going to be like this forever, right?" Jim turns his head to Snake, looking for some help.

"I have other guises I can take, but this one isn't known here in Seattle." Snake pokes her head over Jim's shoulder to talk to Frank directly, "It keeps me free to move around without the Tong keeping tabs on me. You know they hate most meta-humans, right? Add that I'm a woman and they practically ignore me, except to cat-call."

"Right. OK. That's not a bad idea for a disguise, Mr. Snake." Frank slowly lowers his rifle, prompting the group to come to ease, but keeps his narrowed eyes on Snake as Jim walks her past.

"That was quite a moment back there, Jim. I didn't think this kind of "change" would cause so much drama." Snake whispers to Jim as she keeps pace on his arm. "Yeah, and I tried to warn you. Some of these guys are high-strung. Unexpected changes in this game is more than just annoying, it's a liability." Jim walks Snake to the office where the goon is being held and stops outside. "Alright, we have the poor lady tied up in the next room. I want to verify what I got from her before we hand her over to you, so if you could show us lowly mercs some of your magic expertise, we could speed this up and have my guys move on to the next target."

"Damn, Jim." Snake says with a grin "First compliments on my looks, now compliments on my professionalism? If I didn't know any better, I would think you were trying to flirt with me."

Jim's face goes flush. "When the hell did I, oh, dammit. Like I said before, I just want this whole job in the rear-view mirror. The quicker we find Heron, the quicker we get paid. You being good at your job only will make this go faster."

"Alright, Jim." Snake chides the smaller man, "Tell yourself whatever you need to hear. Now let's head in and you can introduce me to our new friend."

Jim coughs politely, looking up at Snake, her arms tightly wrapped around his arm. She releases her python-like grip on his arm allowing him to massage blood back into his hand. He opens the door and waves to Ricardo and Jackal who have obvious questions. Jim responds quickly, "It's okay, this is my friend we were waiting on." The two armored mercs look at each other, shrug and go back to looking at Snake. Jackal messages "Friend? You're going to have to fill us in, Jim." Ricardo floods Jim's vision with a tirade over the group message in an expletive-laced post in Aztlan-Spanish, acted out in graphic detail by the armored Aztlan cyber-ninja. "Ricardo, it's Snake, calm it down a notch or two. You might pop a gasket." Jim messages back, watching the cyber-ninja freeze mid-hump. Snake turns to the mercs and bats her eyes, "Can we have a moment with our friend, alone?" she paused to put a finger on her lips, "I don't know if I can handle this much of an audience." Snake asked, tantalizingly. Jim audibly gulps and looks at the two mercs, first pleading for help, and after none is offered, he relents. "Okay guys, you heard the lady. We need some privacy."

"Awww, I was hoping to record this." Ricardo mopes as he walks out with Jackal, slapping the captive tong on the back as he leaves. Jim removes a gag from the Tong goon and greets the bound woman. "Alright lady, our friend here is going to help me figure out what lies you might have told me. I hope for your sake that you didn't lie to me too much."

The goon responds with swearing, spitting and insults for Snake, using Chinese as her preferred language of insults. Under the barrage of swearing, Snake closes her eyes and holds her hands out, energy faintly glowing from her head reveals the eyeless mask on her face. She grins evilly and lunges a single large hand around the throat of the tied up goon. The goon is cut off by

the sudden assault, mid-word. She starts squeezing her throat and a dark energy pulses in her mask and her grasping hand. The goon slowly turns white, then blue and she gasps for air under the assault of Snake's grasp. When Snake releases her death-grip on the cuffed goon, the bodyguard gasps and then her large cyber-enhanced body relaxes, her eyes barely open showing only whites. Jim feels goosebumps and a pulse of indescribable energy waft past him. A survival instinct urge to run pops into his mind, but Jim maintains his composure. *What in the hell did Snake just do to her? I felt something when she did that and it felt, familiar, maybe? Definitely evil.*

Snake snaps her fingers in front of the goon's face to no reaction. She places her hand on the goon's face and forces her to look into her mask. "Poor mortal, coping with a lack of will using a wall of metal. Almost no fight is left in this one, now. She should be much more open to suggestions."

"What the hell did you do," Jim pauses, "did you do that to," he turns and faces Snake, "on second thought, no. I don't want to know what you just did." Jim shudders at the thought.

"Some secrets a lady keeps close," she murmurs, her voice softening as she recovers from the power of spell casting. Her dour expression washes away with a serpentine grin, "Besides Jim, not all torture has to be brutal and violent. Sometimes if you push too far, the usefulness slips away with their souls. This gives me the option of making her, ummm, pliable, for a short time."

"Okay so ask her about when she last saw Heron." Snake starts caressing the captive's head like a child and talks to the Tong softly in Chinese. Dammit, *Jim, you should have predicted this.* Jim starts loading up his translation software to try to translate what is being said, but they finish as it starts changing their speech into text for him. "Three days ago, auntie, that's when we missed our walk through and now we won't be able to afford to get uncle out of his debt-bondage." *Holy shit, this lady is totally out of it. Whatever she's on, it's better than drugs.* "She says last week she picked up this assignment and reported to Heron. She dropped Heron off one night and she was gone the next morning. They were supposed to meet for a big event and missed it. Let me ask her if she knows anyone who had plans with Heron before her no-show." Snake turns back to the goon and starts to question the hapless woman. "Come on, tell auntie, you must know of someone who had plans to meet with her that night, right? Who was she going to meet? Anyone special?"

"Uhhh, I have heard some rumors about cousin Shin taking her to the Compound. I heard it was a promotion or something, but it sounds like a cover. Some of the men say not everyone comes back from the Compound the same. Some don't come back at all." The goon sounds scared saying the words, even in her relaxed, passive state.

"Compound? What is she talking about?" Jim questions Snake suddenly. She turns to face him, eyebrow raised over her mask, "Now, Jimmy, you can call me impressed. I didn't know you could speak Cantonese." Jim, flustered by the sudden compliment, mumbles, "Oh, uh, advanced enough technology resembles magic. Now, what about this compound." Jim brings his wandering, dirty thoughts and the evasive Lady back on topic.

"It's a ritual site for dark magic, if I'm not mistaken. I'm not sure where it is, but I have been there before. My handlers were really careful about information until our pact was complete. They took me to the compound in the back of a truck and left me there for days in some dark room. That's when I found out about the Tong entering into the deal. I'll need to look into where the compound is, but that will be dangerous. If you can track down this "Shin" agent that was mentioned, you might be able to get that information faster." Jim makes some notes on his list of targets and now has a refined list for tracking and pick-up. He didn't relish the work ahead, a

slightly shorter marathon of hacking to track down a single target. "I can leave her with you, right? We need to bag another of Heron's goons now and it will help keep the others off our scent if you can stuff her somewhere for a day or two."

"I can take care of this little bird for you. I'll send you the details later if I learn any more. The spell I used on her should mess with her memories, so with the right cover, she might not even remember her kidnapping for a few days. Are you going back to your place to work for a while?" Snake asks, with a tinge of excitement in her melodious voice. Jim stretches and yawns "Yeah, I'll probably need a few hours for a breather. After that, it's full-send until we're done. I want to be coasting into the sunset in a few days with this job behind me." Jim sighs, feeling the weight of his fatigue and his injuries crushing his will to be awake. "Let's get this goon out of here so we can all leave. I'll message the gang." Jim said as he messages the mercs to come help move the drooling goon. Frank and Smiles walk into the room and check the cuffed goon who is still in a passive state. "Holy shit. What the hell is wrong with her?" Frank grunts as he passes his hand in front of the goon's zombie-like face to no reaction. "Some kinda magic, Frank. You would have flipped." Jim laughs as he takes a seat on a dust-covered desk in the corner. Jim pulls up his rig and gets to work on the goon's comm-link, his body slumping over as he fully dives to speed up the work.

Frank looks over at Snake and recognizes the mask on her new face from the meeting. "So you can change your shape and drug somebody with "magic", big deal. What's with that mask, Snake?"

"The mask? It's a curse wrapped in powerful, dark magic gifts. It gives me great power, at a cost, but I can't shake it off alone." Her voice loses its volume until she finishes in a low whisper. Frank narrows his eyes and stares at the mask. "What kinda costs are we talking about? If I remember right, Dog didn't wear no mask, but then again he was loyal." Snake's fury visibly rises, but she contemplates Frank's comment, maintaining his stare. "If having the mask forces you to do things you don't want to do, maybe the mask is a punishment." Frank comments, breaks the stare and starts helping poor smiles, who needs help removing the cuffs from the goon. Snake stays quiet in contemplation watching Frank and Smiles lift the goon from the chair. The mercs walk off with the goon between them. Jim, only passively hearing the end of the conversation, comes back to focus to find Snake sitting next to him, expression racked with pain, lost in thought. She notices him stir and flashes him her normal smug smile. "I'll be seeing you later, Jimmy" Snake says as she kisses his cheek before leaving. Jim shivers as an ominous feeling comes over him. He contemplates her words, staring at the elf as she leaves. *I wish I could fully trust her. Hell, I wish she could turn back around and sit with me for an hour. She is the prettiest thing I've seen and I hate to see her suffer. I saw a familiar pain in her eyes when I logged out. I wish I knew more about her, if just to comfort her when I see her struggling with those emotions.* Jim struggles with unfamiliar feelings, knowing not to blindly trust, but still wanting to help the troubled Elf.

The team of mercs cleans the site as best they can, loads the compliant tong into Snake's car and piles back into Frank's van. Jim gets questioning looks from all the team as he gets into the van last. He looks around and finally breaks the silence in the close space, "Okay, I am really creeped out right now, so you can ask whatever questions are clawing at your mind, but only this one time."

Frank cuts the others off by dropping his fist down on his cybernetic leg, stopping them all mid-question. When he has all their attention he grumbles out "So when were you going to let us know about that Snake, Jim. A caster AND a dandelion-eater? Snake is a damn-fine name for a

back-bitter like that. I did what I could to get you free, but I can't trust that."

Jim felt himself getting angry at the accusation, but wasn't sure why. "I had no idea, Frank. I met Snake as the same tong pretty-boy when you saw them at the meeting. I can't sense magic, hell, after they beat ten shades of shit out of me, I couldn't even see. The worst part is, he, I mean she, uhh.... never mind. Let's just say I'm creeped out right now."

The mercs give each other a look as Jim shudders and stares into the distance. Bert broke the sudden silence with his usual boisterous self, "You just be careful, Jimmy, if you sleep with snakes, you'll get bit in strange places. Words to live by. That's how my second marriage ended."

Frank makes a sour face, taking Burt's questionable wisdom as his cue to drive and pulls the van out into the rain-slick streets. The drive is short and quiet. All the mercs seem on edge excluding Ricardo, who pesters Jim with messages wanting all the intimate details on his new voluptuous friend. When they arrive at Frank's lot, they go their separate ways, assignments already sent to each member by Jim.

## 11

Jim rushes back to his un-safehouse as fast as he can to try to get ahead of the team. He speeds his bike through the busy morning streets, dodging commuters and buses as he crosses the awakening city. Jim stops at a convenience store on his way back and grabs his hacking necessities, caffeine, nicotine, and cup-o-noodle. He waddles back to his unsafe-house, loaded with all his gear and recent purchases. Juggling bags, riding gear, and his rig, he barely manages to open his door. He dumps everything on his kitchen table, grabs a mug of stale, warm coffee and heads to his office. *I need to get started at least, so we can get a location on this next target.* Jim sets his rig up and plops into his reclining chair. The safe familiar feeling comes back to him as he dives into his rig, though as he materializes into his penthouse, he feels a nag in the back of his mind. Knowing his penthouse and his safe-house were breached took his feeling of security away. He feels a familiar shiver down his spine, but brushes the feeling off to bad nerves. *I really need to find a new place to hide-out.* Tasking his virtual-agent and using the file from Snake, Jim quickly sets up a surveillance net for poor Cousin Shin. With the details he had in the file, it was only a matter of hours before their target would get spotted at one of their frequented locations and he could use some of that time to rest, now that he was finished. With one last check of his commands, Jim logs out, back into his body.

He vaguely smells the wonderful aroma of fresh coffee brewing as his body starts sending signals to his brain again, the sound of a running shower faintly off in the distance draws his attention. *Did I leave the water running? Shit, that might cost me.* The facts were not lining up in Jim's mind, though he came to focus in his chair when the water stopped. He hears a long sigh and the sounds of bare feet slapping on the hard floor and he panics. Jim reaches over to a drawer on his desk and pulls a compact pistol out and racks the slide. His heart-rate climbs into dangerously high territory as he thumbs the safety off and points it toward the door. Someone is in his apartment. Jim quickly checks his messages for any of his fellow mercs coming over, but sees nothing.

He slowly makes his way towards the door of his office, his foot falls sounding like thunderous slams as his adrenaline spikes. He can hear the slaps of bare feet walking down the hall away from him, towards the kitchen. He edges forward and pokes his head and pistol out the door, sweeping as he goes. The hall is clear with the sounds of foot falls getting further away. *Friggan*

*trapped, the kitchen leads right to the front door. They must not have checked the office. Thank god. I have to push them now while they don't know I'm here.*

Jim pauses and musters himself as best he can. He slowly moves his way down the hall and pauses at the corner. Glasses clink in the kitchen and the coffee pot plays a tune, signaling its completion. *Now or never. Banzai!* Jim rounds the corner pistol in hand and freezes at the scene before him. Bags of groceries, bowls and ingredients line his kitchen, with a pan on his single burner stove piping hot. Snake stands in his kitchen, pouring coffee into two cups, fresh from a shower, wearing a towel on her head and one of Jim's baggy hoodies as clothes. She turns, beams him a bright smile while holding out a mug for him and greets him "Good Morning, Jimmy. I hope you're ready for breakfast." Jim takes a second to react to the picturesque scene, stuffing his pistol into his pocket and reaches for the mug. He drains the cup while staring at his visitor, not trusting her, but never one to deny a hot mug of coffee. He sighs after swallowing the hot liquid joy. "Thank you for that, and thank god for coffee. Now what the hell is going on." Snake's smile grows wider and more serpentine. "I told you I would be seeing you again, I even asked you if you were coming back here. Didn't you put it together? I was planning on coming over to see you."

Jim doesn't have to think too hard about their last meeting, it was etched into his brain with her every curve. "Yeah, yeah. I barely speak English, let alone female sub-text. Is there a purpose for this visit, or are you just here to rub the last few days in my face." Snake takes a mocking apologetic tone, "Oh, Jim, I sure am sorry about what happened between us in the past. I hope this act of contrition will help heal the damage done."

Her joke misses the mark, Jim reacts with a snort of indignation and whispers "Bullshit.". She bows her head for a few seconds before looking back at Jim, her face showing the strain of her situation. "I am risking lives I hold dear to be here, working with you. I am risking my very soul to fight against the tong. I have spared you a horrible fate and only wish you success in your efforts. If you fail, you won't be paid. If I fail, people die and I could be damned for eternity. My efforts are above simple mocking of a defeated adversary."

*I definitely stepped in that. Dammit, now I feel like shit for calling her out. OK, Jim, try and save this before you cause a problem.* "Alright, I'm sorry. I realize what you're risking working with us, but this is a pretty life and death situation to be so glib. Three days ago you and your goons were putting the screws to me and probably going to dump my body in some hole."

Snake mumbles "hah, it's rude to call it a hole, more like a maw." Jim face-palms with his free hand and rubs his temple, "See what I mean? How am I supposed to react to this? If we are going to work together we need some trust, some report, if you will. So far, all I have is a healthy fear of betrayal."

The lady sits, ponders Jim with a wry smile as she contemplates the small man. "Trust, little prey? Most mortals chase money or fame. What ghosts plague you to risk yourself for a turn-coat's comrade?"

Jim tenses under the questioning, his hands clutching his sides as he recalls his mother's face. A flash of her drunken rage and his isolation spring into his mind, Snake's knife-like presence probing memories of his past. "Ghosts don't throw bottles, or blame you for their troubles." He clenches his fists as he resists her probing thoughts, "I've never had much to hold onto and the thought of someone being stripped of what little they have..." Snake gasps before catching herself, her hope swelling with his admission. "Lay off, Snake. Tracing old scars only brings back their pain." Her hand freezes mid-reach, and she pulls back with a soft hiss. Her mind whispers in a soft

and alluring tone, "The deepest scars can shape us both, some for the better, it seems." A sudden silence hangs as Snake stares into Jim's eyes, the taps of rain marking the seconds. "Fine, let's build some... report. Go shower and clean up, you look like the end of a long day. I will make breakfast and then we can get some rest. Work is piling up so chop-chop." Jim hesitates for a tick, prompting Snake to get up and take his empty mug, grinning down at him smugly. "Go, I promise I won't peek. I already helped you once, you can do it yourself this time." Jim blushes and breaks eye-contact, mumbling to himself as he walks away. As he walks back to the shower he pats the pistol in his pocket, reassuring himself.

A cold, fast shower brings his mind and hormones back to normal. *I need to figure out what Snake is up too. That probing into my past really stung, but her reaction? If she is telling the truth, she seriously needs our help. I've never really had someone I felt this way about. Someone I want to protect. The problem is, she knows how to push all the right buttons and get me to react and she knows it.* Jim puts his razor down and splashes his boyish cheeks with after-shave. He stares at his reflection. He'd always had a slim build growing up, and probably due to being dirt poor and under-fed, he wasn't very tall either. He looks over his gaunt worn frame and is glad he spent his time learning. *She's got to be playing with me, she is way out of my league. I need to keep my head in the game and not in the gutter. But, damn it is nice to talk to a lady that isn't my old neighbor or an Avatar.* Jim finishes cleaning up and trots down the hall to his bedroom, realizing he forgot to bring fresh clothes. No cat-calls or whistles came from the kitchen, only the sounds of cooking. Jim enters the bedroom and hesitates, seeing the room is cleaned up from being tossed days before. *She cleans and cooks while I'm out of body, working? How long was she sitting there waiting for me? I guess she could have done anything to me while I was out. I think she earned a little trust. If she wanted to double-cross me, that was the time.* Jim quickly dresses, removes the pistol from his pocket, and walks back to the kitchen.

A small feast is on the table that reminds Jim of a commercial he saw growing up. Snake saunters over with a plate of fluffy pancakes and sets them on the table. She beams with joy over her bounty and waves Jim over "I saw what you picked up on your way back and I was appalled. Jim, you need to take better care of yourself." Her tone is warm and affectionate, something so foreign to the young hacker, he pauses. "I went out and bought a few things while you were working. Sit, and enjoy a decent meal for a change." Snake pats the seat next to her and Jim's heart stirs for a second; this is too much like a dream come true, he feels a tear coming to his eye. Besides an occasional delivery from his nice neighbor, Jim has never had a warm, home cooked meal before. He quickly chokes down his emotions and sits in front of a pile of pancakes. He eats slowly at first, keeping an eye on Snake as she sits watching him, occasionally picking at what little she puts on her plate. After a few bites, Jim stops holding back and gorges himself. He had diner food all the time, but that couldn't hold a candle to this. This food tastes better than the normal reconstituted soy-protein he is used to eating. "For once, I don't know what to say." Jim wipes his face, using the moment to wipe a tear away before Snake can see it. "Thank you for the meal. I don't think I've ever had anyone cook for me like this. I'll have to return the favor, someday." Snake notes Jim's reaction and beams at the high praise coming from her prize.

Jim sits back and pats his stomach, feeling full from his feast. Snake can't help but laugh to herself, remembering feeling the same way a few days before with Jim. "Well, now that you are cleaned up and fed, let's go get some well-deserved rest."

Jim snorts, "You keep saying we and us getting some rest. Other than the couch, I really

don't have anywhere for you to sleep."

"The couch? After all of this, you'd leave me to the chill?" She teases but her golden eyes soften, showing a flicker of genuine need. Jim frowns but still blushes. "Seattle's cold is like the bitter sting of loneliness. Share your warmth with me, Jim. Besides, we are just sleeping. We both have been up for long hours. Call it another trust building opportunity." Jim's blush deepened. *I can't say I hate the idea*, his mind racing with possibilities as he imagines laying with the curvy elf.

"Fine, but you better keep to your side of the bed." Snake giggles, knowing she has won, and starts cleaning up the table. "You sound like a young boy who is scared of women. Tell me Jim, have you shared your bed with anyone before?" She teases in a low voice, as she hovers close to the obviously ruffled man, longing in her eyes. "Shut up, before I kick you out." Jim smiles with his retort, as he starts helping her pile dishes and walks to bed, yawning as he goes. "I call big-spoon!" Snake calls from the kitchen as she finishes and heads to Jim's bedroom. Jim grumbles as he hits the bed, "Fine, I always wanted to be someone's body-pillow. You better not be mad when it's my turn." He barely notices her presence before he fades, her body moving closer, combining their warmth under thin covers. Jim quickly falls asleep as the weight of the day and the food pull him into deep dreams.

Jim barely moves when the Lady pulls at him, her large form moving close causes him to roll towards her. She lays and studies him, trying to find what makes Jim special in the eyes of her father. *His soul is not quite mundane, but otherwise seems normal. He has no special gifts or marks. Other than being small and cute, he really isn't remarkable. Knowing father, he is hiding something from the both of us. Some vague lesson he will spring on me, but by then it will be obvious. I feel good with my decision, but I hope I don't come to regret sparing you, my prize. I never knew mortals could carry such pain. Your spark is faint, but something positive to keep me going. Please, my prey, help me through the darkness.* The lady coiled tightly around the small man, pulling him close. She is careful handling him as he turns towards her and buries himself deeper in her grasp, enjoying the warmth and company. *It's been centuries since I felt comfortable enough to do this. I need this. I'm glad he is enjoying it too.* Snake leans over to his cheek and kisses him, before she relaxes and fades into sleep.

Snake wakes up first, eyes opening to see her prize still tight in her clutches. She smiles, slowly releasing her death-grip on Jim and gently sets him on the bed. He unconsciously reaches for her and she can't help but feel bad leaving him here. She gets up and finds the hoodie she was wearing and throws it over her shoulder. *I'm keeping this. I can see why Jim likes these jackets so much and it gives me a reason to come back.* When she checks her comm-link, only a few hours have gone by in their slumber but she has missed dozens of calls and messages. "Duty calls, my prey." Snake whispers to Jim before she collects her things. After she changes into her work attire, she leaves a note for Jim and sighs, hesitating at the door. *Why am I worried about leaving him? I feel like something might happen to him the second I leave. I am worried that I might be coming on too strong, but normally, I wouldn't care this much. My chest feels tight and I feel like I am burning up. What the hell is happening to me?* Before she could question herself anymore, she turns and leaves, Jim's hoodie folded up and tucked in her bag.

Jim opens his eyes slowly, and checks the bed. He feels a mix of relief and disappointment when he finds himself alone. He rolls over and looks at the ruffled covers next to him. She had bundled the two of them up at some point during their slumber and he enjoyed their closeness. He vaguely remembers reaching his arms around her, being held tightly in hers, getting squished into her larger supple body, but that could have been part of a dream. He had a vivid dreams while he slept in the arms of Snake, dreams that stretched on for hours, the experience gives him a sense of déjà-vu. He slowly gets up, stretches and heads into the kitchen to get some coffee. *Well damn, I guess I didn't piss her off too much.* Jim sees her hand written note to him and feels less disappointed in himself. "Hey Jimmy, thanks for the amazing morning. Best sleep I've had in years. Enjoy what's left of the breakfast and good hunting. I will be seeing you after I put out some fires. - The Lady Snake." *I can't wait to see how she ambushes me next time.* Jim feels a tingle of excitement thinking about their brief time together and wonders about their next meeting. Basking in the re-heated meal removes most of his body's needs, but a nagging guilt in the back of his mind leaves his brain spinning. *I can't get what she said out of my head. The intensity in her eyes and her conviction felt real when I called her out. Those golden eyes hide so much pain when she thinks no one is looking. It hurts me to see her like that and makes me wish I could stop it.*

Jim gets back to his rig and plugs back in, using breathing exercises to focus his mind as he dives back into his system. He needs to check on their target and get this unwilling extraction done. Their target is part of Heron's inner-circle, but is in reality a spy for the new leadership in the Tong. Tracking his movements using Jim's network of cameras and some carefully placed tracking devices lead the merc-group to the location of Cousin Shin's hideout apartment. The job would be risky, Jim didn't like the idea of going into a Tong controlled apartment complex to grab a double agent under the noses of his own guards. Better to grab this one on the move. Using the wealth of data he has on the target, Jim is able to locate the target's routes and pick an ambush point. *With two vans full of goons on this one, I think we can take a single Tong.* Jim starts planning his next moves and it dawns on him. *Shit. If he goes missing, that might tip the Tong bosses off and get Heron moved or geeked if we tip off we are looking for her. That means we will need to move quickly, one van to grab and do the interrogations and one to move and hit the target.* Revising his plan on the spot, Jim starts by checking his messages to check everyone's status. The only message he really wanted to see was absent, nothing from Snake about the location of the Tong compound.

He messages every merc contact he has for this one, not trusting a life-or-death run on new-hires, telling them to meet up at their favorite joint. His feed is a list of affirmations, all hands will be present for this meeting. Jim hesitates in sending the last message. He forms the message in his head seven times before deleting it all and going for the simple and aloof: "Meet me at the "Rusty Barnacle" over at the pier at 8pm. Planning for the future." Message sent. Jim sat in his virtual penthouse, counting the seconds as the message marked as read. It only made his brain-spin more when he got back a winking snake emoji. He couldn't help but feel elated at the attention from the flirtatious elf, even though every bell and whistle signaling danger in his young brain was going off.

Jim cobbles together a rough visualization for his plan, always open to ideas from the group, but not trusting their crazy tactics to his sound plans. He assigns each merc to their team based on their skills, hesitating on which team Snake should be on. *She could do wonders for the interrogation, but that would leave her magic capabilities out of a possible magic fight at the compound.* Jim didn't know any other magicians and kept an arm's length from them, not trusting

what he couldn't understand when tech worked just fine. Using her to cover their weakness could save the team's lives, not to mention giving Jim a chance to watch her work. *Dammit, man. I know I could watch her walk up a flight of stairs all day, but the distraction might get me killed.* Logging off to a cold shower and a cigarette gives him a chance to double check his work before Jim throws on his gear and heads to the meeting.

He can't help but feel nervous as he drives his motorcycle to the pier. Self doubt was all a part of his new career, but a rescue wasn't his average job. He drove carefully as his mind churned over details, looking for something he might be missing. *Why am I excited and scared in a fucked up equal measure? This is more than normal pre-job jitters. I hope this meeting goes better than it does in my head. The team is slow to trust and Snake was a target, just a few days ago.* Jim scans the lot as he pulls up, looking for his group's vehicles. He finds some of the mercs beat him there, Frank and Smiles both owning safe-houses nearby and preferring to scout the site before the meeting. It was a usual haunt for the mercs, who preferred a small hole-in-the-wall to some trendy merc bar. Jim waves to the bartender, who nods back and sends the waitress over Jim's table. The bar had a single booth with a bench pulled up to the side to accommodate their "larger" patrons and Smiles filled the entire bench. The waitress greets the mercs with a warm smile saved for regulars, "Welcome back, killers. Glad to see you all on this side of the dirt. What'll you have?" Frank and Jim put in orders for the group and tip the staff their usual "we weren't here" rates. As the team arrives, the booth fills up quickly. Jim drinks to mask his nerves, until he gets the message he is waiting for, a snake emoji with the words "Come walk me in, this place is giving me the creeps." Jim wiggles his way out of the booth and heads out to have a smoke with Snake and figure out how to ease her into the close group of the mercs. He stops at the stoop, out of a light drizzle and checks his pockets only to find his last cigarette torn to a stub. *Damn, left in a rush and forgot to get a new pack.* Jim tosses the stub and pulls up his umbrella, covering him from the cold rain as he walks into the parking lot. He finds a similar sports-car to Snake's in the lot, but with a new paint-job and a different registration number. *Sneaky friggen snake, you work quick.* Through the privacy tint, he could see the lighted mirror on, and her moving around in the driver's seat. As he walks around the car, the door opens and out slinks Snake in a cocktail dress that looks more like a painted covering then clothes and probably costs more than the bar. She frowns as she looks at the seedy looking, blue-collar bar, but her expression changes to warmth and smiles when she turns to Jim. "I was going to ask you about the dress code since I didn't have time to research the bar earlier, and now I regret it." Snake reaches into her minuscule purse and pulls out a fresh pack of cigarettes. "Here, Jim. I felt bad about burning through so many of your packs together, so I bought you these." She reaches out with the expensive looking gold-foil pack, "They are imports I love from down south. Real tobacco, Jim. Enjoy." She smiles and Jim takes the pack slowly, their hands touch for a second before Jim recoils. She shows her shock at Jim's reaction for a second before covering it up with a smile.

"Yucatan Gold, huh? I've never heard of them, but they sound nice." Jim blushes, embarrassed by his nervous reaction from a nice gesture. *Here she is giving me a gift and I'm flinching like she is about to hit me. The last thing I want to do is offend her. What the hell can I do to make this right?* His heart beats a mile a minute as he holds the pack in his hand and looks it over. He digs out a couple cigarettes and hands her one, she takes it and waits daintily holding her hair back, for him to light it. She pouts as Jim lights his first and pockets his lighter. Before she can protest, Jim grabs the larger woman's hips and pulls her close, lighting the tip of her cigarette with his as they share a

moment of closeness. She stares into his eyes and holds him, Jim looking back without flinching at her touch this time. There is a deep need that he could sense in her as she reflexively coils around him, lifting the smaller man up to her height. A loneliness he knew, but magnified so many times reflected in her eyes. Snake takes a long drag and sets Jim down before exhaling in a long sigh.

"Let me know next time you need a light," Jim says looking up at the tall elf, but not quite meeting her eyes, slightly embarrassed by the public display. "I could get used to that."

"Watching you squirm is fun, my prize, but I don't want you to fear my touch. I would prefer the opposite." Snake says, voice going low and velvety, as she tosses her cigarette and coils around Jim's arm. "Let's get inside Jim, it's cold out here and I can't wait to get in on your little group meeting."

"Oh, I'm sure you'll fit right in. You have a similar lack of impulse control that they might find endearing." Jim said, joking, until he notices Snake silently staring at him.

"I mean your love of interrogation, Jeez, tough crowd." Jim smiles reassuringly to Snake, using the pause to message the group of their return. "Ok, Madame Snake, we need to be honest with the team. You are our Tong insider that is going to help us dismantle their intelligence section." Jim faces Snake and gestures to her arms wrapped around his, "I don't quite know what is going on here, but the more you lead me on, the harder it is to explain everything to the mercs, and especially our Russian benefactors." *I'm not even sure why I am calling her out for being pleasant company. I guess I need to hear her reasoning for all this attention or she's going to drive me crazy.*

The Lady Snake freezes, not used to being called out in situations like this, her heart beats a fast rhythm of need that surprises the ancient serpent. *Normally a lie would come to my lips before I could think, but I'm having problems thinking straight when I am this close to my prize. Something about his being draws me to him, his vulnerability, the loneliness in his life, his confidence. I want to figure out this tugging at my heart before you get away, Jim.* Snake stares into Jim's eyes and brushes his cheek with her free hand, using enhanced vision to gaze at his aura before answering him. She sees everything she needs to answer him without revealing too much. She speaks in a low, hissing whisper, as if Jim is not meant to hear these words.

"I see something in you Jim. Maybe it's nothing, but for some reason, I see light in your aura. It's the only light I've seen in centuries. A spark I thought couldn't exist in my life. My last bit of hope." Snake turns away from Jim, not sure if she wants to see his reaction or just pretend she said nothing. She feels Jim's arm wrap around her back and he pulls her into his arms. His warmth feels wonderful in the cold sea-scented air, his body contact reassuring, warming her to the core. She notices tears forming under the mask she wears, threatening to break the spell she uses to hide it in public.

"It goes against every instinct I have to trust you. My mind keeps saying that you're going to double-cross me the second I let my guard down, but dammit, the pain I see in your eyes drives me crazy. I just want to do good in this world before something comes and rips me out of it. I will do everything I can to help you, please don't let me regret this." Jim looks up into her eyes, his longing plain for her to see. She closes her eyes, by instinct, and she waits. His lips meeting hers blaze like fire as they kiss, his heat bringing out her more primordial side. She lifts the smaller man off the ground as they maintain the kiss, pulling him tight to her as they explore each other. She can feel his temperature rising as they embrace; his hands roaming over her form, making her break the

kiss to catch her breath and maintain her composure. “We really need to get inside,” Snake says in a low husky tone, between breaths, “before it gets too hard to explain ourselves.” She winks to Jim as they separate and he tries to walk off his latest predicament. Jim laughs as he adjusts himself in his armored suit and cleans the lipstick off his face. “Agreed. I could skip this whole meeting thing to leave with you, but I don’t think we would last too long with your bosses hunting us down.” He puffs up a bit before holding out his arm to walk with her, “If you have any problems or need an out, let me know. These guys might be jumpy, but they are some of the most trust-worthy mercs I’ve met.”

Snake glances down at Jim, his expression showing worry amid determination. *I feel like he is more scared of them rejecting me than any problems I might have. He seems to really respect his team. I wonder what their working relationship is like when he treats them like family. Oh Jim, does this mean you’re possibly an orphan or a run-away?* She grips Jim a little tighter as she tries to build a more complete picture of the hacker. The two walk inside quietly without drawing more attention to themselves, after their eye-catching display outside.

She feels Jim get tense as they enter the seedy bar, her high-fashion attire standing out from the normal work clothes of the standard patron, drawing the attention of most in the bar. Jim gives a stern look to the rabble in the bar and wraps his hand around her hips, pulling her close as if to claim her for all to see. She plays along, allowing the smaller man to pull her to him, resting his hand on her voluptuous ass. It tickled her to let the smaller man appear to protect her, knowing she could crush him in seconds, but she allows the display, knowing it should stop any gawkers during their meeting. “Alright, Jim. Let’s get moving before I keep any offending limbs.” Jim moves his hand back to her hip as he guides her to the group’s private booth towards the back of the bar. As Snake takes in the group sitting and drinking, it dawns on her how close she could have come to fighting these mercenaries. *I guess I get to see if I really could take this group or if they really are as good as Jim thinks.* Jim waves to the group who calls out at his arrival but stops abruptly when Snake comes into view. They take turns looking at Jim and Snake, when Ricardo finally breaks the silence. “So when did you two start dating?” Jim blushes and looks away from Snake, who shrugs and smiles. “I get the way it looks, but why do you say that, senor?”

Ricardo laughs and points at Jim. “He couldn’t hide a thing like that from me. Look at how he acts around you, lady. He is doing this whole “first crush” bit and, really, I can’t tell if it’s cute or sad. Aye, Perro, keep your guard up.”

“How about you keep your eyes on the job, Ricardo. I promise I can keep myself professional on the job here with our Tong ally, but you need to keep your tongue off the floor if she is going to work with us.” Jim looks over the group, and makes sure he has their attention. “We have already benefited greatly from intel given by Snake. She is risking everything to be here working with us and I won’t sit by and have you question her intent and my judgement in the same breath.” Jim looks over to Snake and she meets his gaze. He is reassured as she smiles in approval at his comment. *I’ve already mis-judged you, Jim. You defend my honor without question or hesitation. Here, I thought you would be defending them from my accusations. You subvert my expectations of humanity constantly, my prize.* Again, she feels a stir she hasn’t felt in a very long time, she feels a warmth in her chest that stirs her emotions. She feels joy as she quietly watches Jim confidently brief the team, the young hacker in his element. Her part in the assignment is brought up and she focuses on the plan again. Jim explains that they will be taking the data from Shin’s ‘link to track his routes for the past few days, leading the assault team to the Tong’s

compound. Snake feels fear build in her stomach at the thought of going back to the site of such evil. She grips Jim's arm reflexively, lightly squeezing as he recalls her time in darkness at the ritual site. The magic done at that site left a mark on the people and the surroundings that tainted the souls of those exposed. Heron being taken to this site was one of the worst possibilities, but without these mercenaries, Snake couldn't do anything for her comrade.

"Is there anything you wanted to add, Madame Snake, anything you can remember from your time at the tong compound?" Jim takes her hand from his arm and holds it in his, gazing into her golden eyes, warming her heart as she grips his hand. "I was taken there much like you were moved around, Jim, head-bagged, hands bound and drugged. I woke up and I was in an underground holding cell and left there for days. It felt like an eternity before they took me to the ritual site. After they took the bag off my head, I was in a ritual circle in a giant room. I think it could have been a warehouse. The Tong has too many holdings for me to track it down to one site, but if you could get the location, I might be able to help with some extra details I dug up for the sites I have already researched." Snake looks around the table at the grizzled group of mercs as they size her up. All seem to show some kind of approval, besides Frank, who left to get a drink the moment the elf started speaking. *Well, at least most of them don't outright hate me, well, most of them. Frank might be an issue, but he seems troubled by his past. I hope Jim can help me navigate such a tight-knit group. Oh, and he has to introduce me to his shark friend.* She locks eyes with Smiles' black doll-like eyes and she can't help but feel a predatory kinship with the beast in humanoid form. The Lady gives the shark man a nod and a smile, which he returns, showing his trademark grin, a maw of teeth that reminds her of family.

As the plan reaches its completion, Jim sends pictures of the target to all involved and the teams split into their groups, setting up meetings for gearing up and heading to the job. She can't help but feel the outsider as her team decides their meet up location and gear load-outs without even registering her or asking what she brings. Jim, sensing her uneasiness, coughs politely to get her attention. "I usually don't sweat the meet up spots and all that. These guys are pros when it comes to their specialties. They might argue over which kit to bring or who's place we meet up at, but I leave all that bickering to them." Jim's comment brought her a little comfort, seeing the groups arguing as a way to blow off a little pre-work steam. "By the way, did you need to grab any gear? What does a spy like yourself even bring on a job like this?"

Snake smiles a wide serpentine grin in response, a predatory look coming through in her golden snake-eyes. "I have my bag of tricks I bring with me. It's designed for infiltrations and quiet extractions. You should know how effective it can be, Jim, since our first meeting." Jim's hand reaches up and rubs his neck where she had darted him out of reflex. "Okay, point taken. I should have known better than to ask. Let's go get your bag of tricks then and head over to Frank's. Do you have another disguise you can use that might be a little more amenable to Frank, or should we get you an extra armored vest?" Snake ponders the available forms she knows, but realizes she doesn't have the time to change. "That is something I need time to do. Every disguise I take needs more than a wardrobe change, it takes a lot of channeled mana to fully change my form. Frank will have to hold his fire for the time being." She giggles, her smile changes to a wry grin, her voice taking a teasing sultry tone, "Besides, I will have you to protect me, won't you, Jimmy?" Jim smiles and blushes, still not used to her attention, but warming up to her teasing. "Ha, I guess I can be your extra vest for tonight, as long as you keep close to me," Jim quips, but finishes with a more serious tone, "but please, don't get shot a lot, I can't stop much." Snake's mirthful laugh is musical and

infectious, getting Jim to giggle at his own joke, lowering the tension the two feel as they leave the dingy bar and head to her car. She can't help but stare at the smaller man, inspired by his courage in such a small package. *Here my prize is, a mortal small in stature but confident and courageous in the face of danger. His promise to help me is touching, but I have heard similar before. Still, he surprises me at every turn, my little spark.* As they reach her car, she opens the minuscule trunk and pulls out a small duffel. Jim marvels at the small bag, "You must be a natural with such a small bag for kit."

Snake smirks at the comment, "Well, unlike your mercenary friends, I rely on guile and my grace to get in places. You don't need to bring big guns and armor if they let you in willingly with a smile on their faces."

"And if that doesn't work, you dart them and hide them." Jim laughs, not fully getting the idea, but getting close. *I wonder if I should ever tell him how I get rid of bodies in that situation? I wonder if I should ever tell him about how I, no, I don't think he'll forget that kind of trauma. Best to not talk about who ate who and such.*

The two meet up with Bert and ride with him over to Frank's private lot. The ride is quiet as the team focuses on studying the plan and prepping their equipment. Snake only has a few items to check before she turns to Jim, who is unconscious and leaning on her, his body limp from his mind being in the virtual realm. She takes the time to study his peaceful face, brushing some unruly hair out of his eyes. He stirs and his eyes open to her leaning close, still touching his face. Jim smiles and reaches for her hand, "I've never felt happy to leave the 'net before. Now, it seems like every time I log out, you make it worthwhile." The complement from Jim puts a smile on the ancient serpent's lips, her heart skipping a beat at his admission. "If you pull this rescue off successfully, I promise, you will think every cut and scrape will be worth it." *If he manages to rescue Heron, there is nothing keeping me chained to the Tong, besides my mask. I pray that you keep your promise and help me banish this demon enforcing this deal. I can't do this alone. I need you, Jim.*