

## 16. ... a lovesome thing . . .

Adam couldn't sleep. Being so near Vlad and so impossibly separated was only part of the problem. He found the heat intolerable. Sticky. Draining. And the sense of being watched hadn't left him, which was stupid considering that they were in a tent. The others were asleep. He could hear their soft breathing, and, in Bob's case, occasional snores. But of course they were all military. Probably trained to sleep under any circumstances. He turned over for the umpteenth time and tried to lie still. There was a persistent scratching sound, almost at the limits of his hearing. Something crawling across the roof of the tent, no doubt. Nothing to worry about. But enough to irritate.

Sharon was restless again too. She was guiltily aware that Teal'c was aware of her interaction with the Frenchman. But really, she hadn't been flirting. Or only a little bit. To make him feel welcome. And there was no way she and Sam were going to stay on their own and this tent was the one with room, so . . . She glanced at her watch. Teal'c and Joe would be on duty just now. Watching the branches; watching the sleepers. There were different ways to punctuate that sentence and she shivered slightly. There was a sound. Not a full unzipping like last night. More one or two hooks of a zip. She had to have dreamt it. Get a grip, girl, she told herself.

Teal'c patrolled with Joe. There were more insects at night. And more bats, or whatever, hunting. Nothing seemed particularly hostile. Even the shield bug that had invaded Sam's ear hadn't bitten or stung. Probably as alarmed by them as they were by it. The air was warmer than ever and the branches were moving. But there was no breeze. Teal'c spun in a full circle, trying to pinpoint the threat. Joe turned towards him then towards the tents.

The thorns made clean tears in the fabric. The branches moved gently. Dipped in slow but inexorable motion through each rent. Grasped. Secured their prizes.

For a moment, Adam believed he was dreaming as he saw Vlad lifted out through the slit, still cocooned in his sleeping bag. Sharon knew she was awake, and tried to rise but was pushed back by the thorns as Sam swung through the roof.

Teal'c and Joe were pointing their weapons, fairly uselessly, as the others piled out of the tents, alerted by Sharon's yells. Anything they did was going to do more damage to Sam and Vlad than to the plants that held them. Cutting the stems might be an option but Jack was reluctant to order that until they knew more. There were thorns crowding the campsite, vines equal in diameter to human arms. Sam was held in a cuplike bloom, her face and shoulders showing. Vlad was twined in a cats' cradle of whip-thin briars. Both of them looked frightened, but not, thank goodness, in pain. Neither of them spoke.

O'Neill went through the rigmarole of introducing themselves and their mission. To plants. Bob was reminded of Ron's turtle. Adam's heart was somewhere in his feet. They all looked pale with shock. Or at least green - some pale and some dark. Bill reflected on how black skin showed the same colour changes as white, just displayed on a different background.

Then the jungle writhed. The air cooled and there was a whisper, a sliding. Vines coiled. The two prisoners, hostages, whatever they were, disappeared from view, passed from branch to branch, still in their thorny bindings, further into the green and out of sight.

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There was no more sleep, no more sentry duty. The one thing they all wholeheartedly wanted was to retrieve their companions. The one thing they had no idea how to accomplish.

Teal'c had had the presence of mind to mark the direction in which the jungle had swallowed their friends. Now he replaced his staff, thrown pointing towards the path of that swallowing, with his sleeping bag.

"It is easy to lose all sense of direction in a place like this," he said. "No moon, no stars, no points of reference. We could turn round once and be lost."

"So we'll have to leave markers as we search. And leave people at the base, too." Jack sounded worried, calculating the best strategy for his search and rescue attempt.

"Bob, you stay here with Sharon, Bill, Joe and Adam. I'll take Jean, as my jungle specialist, with Teal'c, Jonas and Ron."

Adam looked mutinous and Jack recalled what he knew about the Englishman. A facility with weapons, especially staff weapons, and a strong friendship with the Russians.

"On second thoughts, I'll take Adam. Jonas, stay with Bob and the others. My team, bring weapons, and anything we can use to mark the way. Rope, string, whatever."

They dressed rapidly and set off, shouldering their way through the maze of vines. Adam hoped there was no minotaur in the interior.

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Vlad could feel the thorns smoothly separating him from his wrappings. The leaves touched the bag and clothes tentatively then they were discarded with a shrug? Fine tendrils grew from the branches that bound him and he found himself further ensnared. Every part of his body was enfolded in a green tracery. It was tight enough to restrain but not to hurt. Except that it was mental torture. To his right, he could see Sam's face in the flower. Her sleeping bag and clothing had been tossed away too and were on the ground in an untidy pile. Her eyes met his. "Can you move?" Stupid question really, but she need to speak to him, to make contact.

"If I am moving a little, is OK. If much, it is tighten. You?"

"Within limits. I seem to be free inside this flower, but if I try to raise my hands the petals - squeeze. And something has my feet."

Vlad felt more worried for Sam than for himself. He couldn't help seeing her prison as a giant pitcher flower, ready to digest . . . His own bindings were annoying but not immediately threatening.

"They come for us."

"Of course. Jack would never leave anyone. But we were carried a long way, and in this stuff, it may take them a while to find us."

"You are OK?"

"Yes. It - it seems to be stroking me with its - stamens? And there's a low humming noise. But yes, I'm fine. No injuries and I can feel all my extremities." She gave a quick, brave grin. The pitcher plant analogy had almost certainly occurred to her too.

"You?"

"It seem to be exploring me. The tendrils - they everywhere. But I not hurting. Just tickling a little bit."

"Any humming?"

"No, no humming."

There didn't seem to be much more to say. But they needed to talk, to stay in touch with each other. Vlad started to tell Sam about forests in Russia. About mushroom hunts on autumn mornings. The coolness. The quiet.

Anything to distract them from the heat and their situation. Then a vine stretched up and wound round his head, closing his lips. Apparently they weren't supposed to chat.

Minutes passed.

"Vlad! It's bathing me in some sort of fluid. It doesn't sting or anything but I'm wet, and, and . . ." "The last word was abruptly muffled as the flower seemed to gulp and Sam's mouth sank below the lip of the petals. Definitely no chat.

But he couldn't restrain a groan as the tendrils explored - and squeezed - intimately. The tendrils seemed to hesitate but he didn't dare breathe a sigh of relief. Emasculated by a vine? Well, perhaps better than total digestion. Sam's eyes looked reasonably calm. The humming she'd mentioned was loud enough for him to hear, now. It was quite musical. Like a lullaby. Though neither of them was in the least bit likely to sleep.

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Jack's group was completely surrounded by jungle, forest, plant. Jack himself was holding a weapon, on full alert. Jean-Pierre was frowning. Plants on Martinique, or in the parks of Paris, where he'd studied, didn't kidnap his friends. Teal'c and Adam were forcing a road with their staffs. Ron was marking their trail. Suddenly, he stopped.

"Listen!" They were about to tell him he was imagining things but within seconds they could all hear it. A low humming. Gentle and terrifying. All around.

And beneath it, a fearful counterpoint. A human groan.