

SGX 21. Ice and fire.

The night, if it was night, and the cold, seemed interminable. The noise was intermittent now but they were too tired to talk and instead dozed when they could, huddling together for warmth.

Eventually, the lights brightened and a guard came into the cell. He motioned them to their feet and led them back to what they thought of as the interrogation room. Ron was at the limits of his ability with the signing and Bob worried for him. He wanted the young man to have responsibility but this was a heavy load.

After a long and apparently fruitless conversation they were manhandled into yet another room and forcibly stripped of their garments. Resistance was pointless. Four against hundreds, deep inside enemy territory. None of them wanted to risk death in heroic defiance.

Then some odd machines were trundled in on wheels and the shivering group were herded onto a concave platform which was then swung into the air. As another platform, crowded with lumps of metal, rose to balance it, it dawned on all of them at once that they were being weighed.

One of the men opened out a large poster or chart. He was comparing their sale reading with something on it. On the back, towards them, with no attempt at concealment, was a picture. A fire, with an old fashioned pot. A diagram with figures something like a thermometer. And below that, a smaller diagram of what looked like joints of meat.

It didn't take genius to work out what was going on. No friendliness, no food, an attempt to establish that they were alone or at least far from home, and now weighing, without any care for their welfare. The colonel felt sick. They should never have entered the cave system. Better to have fought the few guards outside than to end up on the menu for these people who served the Goa'uld willingly. His watch was with his clothes but he was aware that enough time had passed that Stargate Command would be worried by their lack of contact. He could only hope they would be worried enough to do something about it.

Sharon's eyes were fixed on him as if he could pull a magic rabbit out of a non-existent hat. Vlad's eyes were closed and the Russian was muttering fiercely in his own language. Ron appeared to be praying.

'Well' he asked them softly, 'Do we just die, or do we die fighting?' He thought he knew what the answer would be.

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Back at the base, Adam had a bad feeling about the mission. There was no reason for his mood and he tried to put it down to the fact that it was the first time Vlad had gone off

world without him since they became lovers. But he couldn't shake off the cloud that seemed to hang around his desk, his office, and even the commissary. So he wasn't surprised when he heard the arguing that followed the realisation that SGX weren't calling in. Hammond wasn't anxious to send another team to the planet but Jack won, helped by Major Davis, who seemed to think Washington would be upset if efforts were not made to rescue one of their tame Russians. O'Neill, to give him his due, was concerned about the entire group.

As SG1 suited up in snow gear, Adam watched helplessly beside the gate controls. If anyone could bring Vlad back to him, Jack O'Neill could. He wanted to join the rescue mission but knew better than to ask. As a civilian with leave to stay on earth during his girlfriend's visit, he couldn't very well ask to go rushing off after his missing team. He turned wearily towards the commissary. He envied St. George. At least the saint had had permission to go dragon hunting.

Paul joined him for coffee and they commiserated with each other. The major told him how he and Jack had got together after Daniel Jackson's death, and how he hated being left behind while the colonel explored and fought the universe. Adam listened but half his mind was wrapped in a snow suit, and had gone through the Stargate without him.

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SG1 were expecting trouble from the moment they stepped through the gate, whatever the MALP had to say about silent snow covered hills. There was a faint trail of footprints in the snow, almost obliterated but sufficient to follow. So they followed it, weapons held ready.

As a result they were able to distrust and disarm the guards who met them, without even trying to communicate. Jack then indicated that if the guards knew what was good for them they would take the newcomers to their friends. It seemed they did and would.

They probably hoped to overpower SG1 in the tunnels but Jack contacted Hammond, demanding back-up, and the team were ready for the welcoming committee underground. Having secured the entrance and a short distance within, they paused to wait for another team to show up. They continued to demand their fellow gate travellers, and soon realised, as SGX had done, that speech wasn't going to be any use. Unfortunately, no-one had any sign language whatsoever. However, the natives appeared to understand scowls and weapons and gestures, and eventually one of them opened a small door in the wall of the tunnel. It hid a panel like a computer screen and communication with the people in the underground world was established. As the panel came alive, Jack was relieved to hear sounds from behind him. Voices.

Two back-up teams and a smoke 'bomb' later, SG1 were in undisputed control of the tunnels, and a guard came waving his arms and weaponless to invite them further in.

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SGX had made a dash for the door of the weighing room but without clothes or weapons they were unable to prevent their recapture. Bravery had got them nowhere. Strangely, they weren't damaged or even restrained by anything other than grasping hands. But they were thrown unceremoniously into a cauldron of water and the sides were too steep and too slippery to climb. Swimming would exhaust them quickly; they floated, hoping against hope that something would happen.

Something did. As the water began to warm, Sharon found her treacherous brain enjoying the faint comfort it brought. Their backs were warm now, though their faces and the fronts of their bodies were still icy. Vlad wondered if this was how it felt to fall asleep and die in the snow. Ron continued to pray and Bob joined him. They said the words aloud for mutual comfort, unsurprised when the other two didn't join in, but prepared to intercede for everyone. Vlad thought of Adam. Sharon tried not to think at all.

The water was becoming uncomfortably hot when a familiar face leaned over the rim and a voice that had brought fear to Goa'uld said something glorious about getting them out of there. The sound echoed in the hollow of the vessel and drowned out the moaning of the machines. Bob Somerfield had never thought of Jack O'Neill as an angel, but he was certainly an answer to prayer.

With earth teams holding the entrance, the tunnel dwellers had recognised stalemate. There were other colonies, but none near enough to send help faster than more (and better armed) help could come through the gate, and the miners were intelligent enough to know when they faced defeat. SGX were hauled out of the water, dried roughly and handed their clothes.

Gradually, saying nothing because of the noise, watching the enemy at every step, the SG people retreated. First to the entrance, then slowly to the gate. They weren't followed, or if they were, they didn't see their followers. Someone dialled out and everyone filed through, Jack bringing up the rear. He let Bob stay until the end, aware of the other man's threatened pride and his gratitude, and aware, too that it could have been any of them in there. He ushered the SGX leader into the gate ahead of him and followed with a sigh of relief.

The planet would be declared off limits. Nobody wanted a war with an uncertain outcome for the sake of a few mines. Whatever was in them. And whoever the tribute takers were.

And SGX tumbled thankfully into the infirmary, out of the cold.

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Adam knew they were back. He knew they were all safe. He was desperate to see Vlad but he would have to wait till the medical checks were over. He invented some work that demanded overtime, phoned Emma and settled in his office. He simply couldn't go home. He considered explaining his feelings to Emma but was stopped by the risk of her telling his mother. He had no desire to 'come out' at such a distance and in such a way. Emma would be unlikely to see the need to keep his secret.

The checks were satisfactory. Alternate freezing and boiling weren't a healthy option but neither had reached life threatening extremes. The recommendation was for a few days' rest or at least light desk work. The debriefing could wait till the next day – O'Neill had given Hammond as much information as was needed to close access to the planet.

The team were told to go home. Vlad headed for Adam's office instead. He was sure he would find him there.

Adam sensed the shadow in the doorway and looked up from the computer screen. His chair toppled backwards onto the floor as he threw himself out of it and reached Vlad's arms just as the Russian closed the door. The frustration of Emma's presence followed by the fear during the last few hours combined to make their reunion fierce and explosive. At first they clung to each other, kissing, scratching, biting, trying to appease hungers that neither of them had known were so deep. Then they ended somehow on the floor, rolling this way and that in their eagerness to get at skin, at sex, at intimacy. They didn't bother to lock the door; life affirmation felt more important than privacy. But they weren't disturbed.

Afterwards, Adam was sore, from the roughness of the standard office carpet, and from the equal but welcome roughness of Vlad's love making. Vlad's skin was sore too, mostly from the cold and the heat it had suffered, but with additional marks where Adam's nails had almost penetrated his back. They took long minutes to disengage, to bring their breathing back to some semblance of normal, and then to exchange hesitant smiles that acknowledged another milestone in their relationship.

They went back to the surface together and travelled home, parting near their respective apartment blocks. They didn't talk, except for a murmured goodbye. No jokes this time. And both of them knew for certain that Emma was merely an inconvenience to be tolerated for a little while.