

5....to boldly go...

The Goa'uld could have told them.

If there's an apparently empty planet, and there's a stargate, there's a reason. Not usually a good one.

It had been called Sahara, or an approximation, by the people the Goa'uld had settled there, but it had been abandoned when the physical difficulties proved intractable and the cost of getting the ores outweighed the cost of keeping the settlement viable. Mile after mile of sand flowed round rocky outcrops, over an entire world. The rocks contained minerals, true, but the movement of the sand was constantly eroding them.

The moon created tides but there was little or no water. Sand tides ebbed and flowed, altering the terrain as they went. Sometimes one rock stood above the desert, sometimes another. Buildings simply didn't last. Nor did populations. The lunar cycle was long - six months. The short probes could not have predicted the problems.

Vlad was walking slightly behind the others as they left one outcrop and headed for another, sampling equipment at the ready. His mouse-brown hair, barely within the tolerances of regulation length, licked his face in the slight breeze. The climate was warm and although clouds hid the sun, the sky was bright. Everything had gone according to plan and this would be the last sample before their return. Vlad enjoyed the multiplicity of tasks that differentiated Stargate travel from ordinary soldiering. He enjoyed being with Stargate Command altogether. Meeting people from other countries was almost as exciting as seeing different planets. He felt sorry for the Russian team, who kept themselves to themselves and looked down on newcomers like him, scattered in multinational teams. They were missing a lot.

He was daydreaming, remembering the party on Saturday, the look on Adam's face when he saw the St. George picture, and the pleasure of waking up among friends on Sunday. So he didn't notice the actual moment when the sand moved.

It ebbed strongly, with a strange sucking noise, but by the time they heard that it was too late. Bob, Sharon and Ron went slipping and sliding, nothing to grab, nothing to hold, down an immense slope till a buried rock, a mere hiccup in the terrain, stopped their descent, leaving them at the foot of a sheer cliff, breathless and shaken. Bob had landed on Potts, who was more than shaken - they had all heard his ribs crack, and the pain on his face belied his claim to be all right.

Vlad was left at the top. He thought quickly, and stripped. His uniform, cut to shreds with his army knife, made a rope just long enough to reach his stranded teammates. He tied one end round his waist and dug his feet into the sand. He had to get them up and out - there was no time to go for help or to wait and see what would happen next. Sharon was the first to climb, and it took all his strength to hold her. Even then, he skidded forwards, the sand flaying his chest. She gasped when she saw the state he was in but immediately threw the rope back over the side, lay down and grasped his ankles, digging her own feet in. Then she yelled at him to stop. She was just, *just* able to hook her feet round a spike of rock if she inched back. It would shorten the reach of the rope, but it should still be long enough. "Potts next," she said, unnecessarily. Of course, in these circumstances, Bob would be last.

But it wasn't that simple. Potts had passed out. Bob stripped too, to his shorts and singlet, and cobbled together a makeshift sling. Vlad and Sharon took the strain of raising the dead weight of an unconscious man without complaint. Sharon was crying tears of stress by the time they pulled him over the lip of the cliff, but they had done it! Bob came up at last, and they hurried to the gate, Vlad and Sharon carrying Ron between them.

Somerfield dialled out and it was a very sober little group that stumbled back through the iris, one member unconscious, and two in varying states of undress. They had left most of the rock samples behind, preferring to carry their colleague, but it would hardly matter. Sahara would not be scheduled for another visit in the near future.

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It was Vlad's turn to be in the infirmary. The damage to the whole of the front of his body looked like severe burns - in places his skin was completely missing. A gauze sheet was the only covering he could bear, but the worst thing was the advice not to mix alcohol with the antibiotics prescribed to prevent infection. He had never been a heavy drinker but total abstinence didn't suit either his temperament or the present circumstances.

Niki ignored the advice. Knowing Dr. Fraiser would confiscate anything obviously alcoholic, he emptied an orange juice carton and resealed it after filling it with vodka. When that failed (doctors weren't born yesterday) he consulted Adam and together they came up with a solution. The stuffed toy bear they presented to Vlad, with straight faces, was indeed

stuffed. Its furry tummy held a strong polythene bag of drink, accessed by a straw through the creature's mouth. Vlad kissed the bear enthusiastically once Niki had whispered the secret, getting some strange looks from a passing nurse.

"Is Russian bear," Niki pointed out. "Of course has vodka!" They were speaking English for Adam's sake, and Vlad grinned.

"Maybe St. George is liking to kiss the bear?" he asked. Adam declined. His acquaintance with vodka was already progressing too quickly.

"Maybe Brits are never kissing bears," suggested Niki, and Vlad managed to look worried and amused at the same time. Adam blushed. The innuendoes in their teasing were beginning to get to him, and he wasn't sure how to react. Or even if he was correct in his interpretations.

"I'm just not fond of vodka," he muttered, to an incredulous gasp from the Russians.

He came alone at lunchtime the next day. Niki was in a meeting, and Adam felt sorry for Vlad, lying alone and bored. The officer was in a private cubicle, probably to guard against infection although visitors were allowed and the only effect was to make his stay lonelier than it need have been. American TV was on offer but that was unlikely to appeal for long - foreign language programmes may be interesting but they are also hard work. Adam brought some grapes. He'd picked them up at the small supermarket near the flat, not sure what to bring. A refill for the bear would be difficult, magazines were like television, in the wrong language, and chocolates didn't seem appropriate. Vlad ate some of the grapes slowly, licking his lips after each fruit, and offered the bunch to Adam, who shook his head.

"There are too many jokes about visitors eating the gifts they've brought. I'm not going to add to them," he said. But Vlad reached out and pushed a grape against his mouth and it would have been churlish not to accept. They continued to demolish the bunch by turns, contentedly.

They discussed the idea of visiting Potts, who was in the next room with a punctured lung and several broken ribs. Adam had noticed that the military seemed to mix more freely here than at home, where it was considered bad form for an officer to socialise with other ranks. He supposed it was a product of small teams, whose members had to bond to some extent for the sake of survival. Although nobody much bonded with Potts.

Another reason for the easy social relationships was probably the fact that no one in the infirmary here could be visited by family or outside friends. Official secrets kept them prisoners in their sickbeds, and even their nearest and dearest were unlikely to know they were ill.

At this point in his musings, Sharon appeared, with what looked to be a very adult magazine, a twinkle in her eye and a slight maroon blush on her dark cheeks. Vlad nearly choked on his grape and Adam doubled over laughing.

"Thank you Sharon," Vlad managed, while Adam collected himself. "Niki can be borrowing it later, I think."

"What about me?" asked Adam.

"No, I think I am not liking you seeing this," said Vlad, mock stern, but Sharon, indignant, told him where she had bought it, so that he could get one for himself. Adam shrugged. "I'll just look over Niki's shoulder," he promised.

"As long as you are not leaning on his shoulder," said Vlad, a sudden serious expression clouding his grey eyes.

Luckily, Sharon was looking at his temperature chart, and missed the exchange. She told them Colonel Somerfield was visiting Potts, who was quite depressed at the prospect of some time in bed. Bob, it seemed, had taken the unfortunate airman some mainstream magazines, and a box of chocolates with a label saying it was from all the team. They were discussing what Vlad might like. The magazine had been her own idea. Bob would never have gone along with it.

"All I want to do is to be kissing the bear," Vlad told her, and Sharon had to be let into the secret.

"And eat grapes with Adam," Vlad added, to which Sharon shook her head in puzzlement, before leaving to write up some reports.

Adam hesitated. He had work to do, himself. But he felt inexplicably happy in Vlad's company.

"I'll come again tomorrow," he promised. "With more grapes. Do you want any more magazines?"

"Not like that one," said Vlad grinning. "But I am thinking more grapes will be good!"