

A Chill in the Bones

by

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Love died. If not from the mortality of the flesh, then from the erosion of caring. Either way, it left numbness in its wake. A chill developed in the bones, from the struggle to become self-contained again, to pull back into the shell and retreat behind defensive walls. And from there the view was a desolate wasteland, a scorched battlefield, a mire of shit and rotting flesh.

Language was construction. Jack spoke to him in building blocks. Every barb, every hollow joke, every dismissal was mortared into place. Daniel matched him with deliberate obtuseness, backhanded compliments, and calculated insults. They worked well together. An unimpeded construction.

Jack understood this, and Daniel was thankful. No need to explain, no need to talk about it, ever. It was a freedom to be left inside the walls. Jack understood that, too. He had his own walls, just as thick and carefully erected, impenetrable, invulnerable to attack. He'd been working on them longer, and the persona he projected to the outside was so perfect that most people never noticed it cast no shadow. A perfect hologram: officer, nice guy, bad-ass colonel, smart-ass wit.

Daniel had only noticed because he was projecting his own persona. He looked for shadows now. It was the one search he knew would never be fruitless, one way or the other.

It was survival. Love died, and the widowed survived. The world continued rotating on its axis and revolving around the sun, and the sun continued circling through the galaxy, and the galaxy continued stretching across a universe which continued to expand infinitely. The stargate continued spinning. These were the facts of life. Love died. Life went on.

There were many types of survival, and Daniel had never wanted his to be a desperate kind, but each day brought another assault.

Memories, thoughtless kindnesses, civilizations on the verge of destruction. The more he retreated, the louder the cries at the gates, hammering into his mind. He was holding on, just barely, through sheer force of will.

Letting go seemed an attractive option sometimes. If he let go, perhaps he'd fall into a black hole, and Jack would let him, as he had Frank Cromwell. It was a romantic, tragic end. Daniel held on; he couldn't imagine doing anything so melodramatic.

The planet they were on, known to the SGC as P7R-349 and called by its inhabitants Fasahlqi, was ochre with water of bright red, blood red. It was an angry landscape of jagged fault scarps and deep canyoned snaking rivers rushing and pushing their way to the vast inland sea. The nights were hot and dry, the days clammy and prone to sudden afternoon thunderstorms. The lightning here streaked pinkish, and the downpours cleared the air, however briefly, of its faint metallic taste.

Over a full day's walk from the stargate was the capital city of Dzerigichi on the inland sea. A sprawling, cramped, haphazard arrangement of wards and squares and dead-ends, it was home to several hundred thousand people, one of the largest alien communities SG-1 had encountered. Their development was early industrial. They were just starting to exploit the resources of the indifferent ochre earth.

Jack didn't want to be here. Daniel wondered just where Jack ever wanted to be, since he was never comfortable on Earth, either. Neither was Daniel, but he found some escape on other worlds, a short-lived thrill of discovery before the archaeological record told its own sad, familiar story of settlement, conquest, rebirth, destruction, rebirth.

Sam wanted to be here, observing a geomagnetic anomaly and analyzing a new mineral which the locals had alloyed with naqada. Jack got to negotiate for raw naqada, although it was an inferior grade, while Daniel and Teal'c explored the city.

In many ways, it was too much like Earth. They walked through slums with sewage running down open ditches in the dirt streets. Tiny bony children ran half-naked and barefoot from one stuccoed cottage to another, playing with mangy dogs. Fat thick-veiled women stood gossiping in doorways,

their dark eyes lazily following the intruders as they walked past. It depressed Daniel to see how the trappings of Earth haunted them wherever they went. Given a brave new world to inhabit, mankind fell into the same old ruts, made the same old mistakes.

Their destination was the university. Daniel had been surprised to learn there was one. The Fasahlqians had seemed too practical, too focused on mining and manufacturing to care much about higher education. But Kansharan, their primary contact, had quite proudly informed Daniel that they had had a university in Dzeriglichi for over a hundred years. Not proud enough to escort them, however, so Daniel and Teal'c navigated the narrow, treacherous streets without a map, taking a circuitous route to what Daniel hoped was their destination.

A storm hit just after noon, blotting the sun and sending the dogs, children, and women indoors. Daniel and Teal'c ducked into a corner cafe, open on two sides, while an opaque sheet of rain covered the street. They sat on a stone bench, the only customers, and a teenaged boy served them complimentary clay cups of a strong, bitter tea. Teal'c abstained, so Daniel drank his portion as well. Daniel asked for directions, and found out that the university was across the street.

The rain let up. The door to the university was unremarkable -- plain brass set into a stucco wall. The words 'University of the Capital' were hand-lettered next to it. Daniel opened it, and they stepped into a courtyard, gleaming in the late day sun emerging from the storm clouds.

It wasn't a large courtyard, and only three doors led off from it. One was locked. Teal'c opened the second, and they walked into a windowless hallway. A white-haired, crinkled man sitting at a small desk looked up from his ledger.

"Guests?" he asked, neutral.

"Yes." Daniel started to make introductions, but the man shoved the ledger and an ink stick at them and asked them to sign in. Daniel's signature looked out of place below the blocky, right-to-left script of the other entries.

The man waved them on, and they followed the hallway until it opened into a high-ceilinged

room of shelves with two tables in the center. A library.

Daniel had always hated libraries as cold, inconvenient places with abbreviated hours, sulky unhelpful staff, and insanely byzantine methods of arranging things. The microfilm readers never worked, the photocopiers always spat out black squares instead of legible illustrations, and the library administration had sent him threatening letters when he neglected to return a dozen or so books one year. But this place was warm, seemingly unstaffed, and quaint. The books were all small and long and stacked on their sides.

Teal'c pulled out a book and leafed through it. "This one appears to be about mining methods." He held up the book and showed Daniel a diagram of a mineshaft with a pulley system. Daniel selected a book from another shelf and skipped over the blocky script which he had not had time to decipher yet, and found some illustrations of pick-axes.

"So does this one."

He tried some other sections of shelves and pulled a dusty seldom-opened book from the top shelf, looking for the illustrations. The first illustration was a map. The size and shape of the inland sea were unmistakable. A place was marked outside the city, farther away from the stargate. Daniel turned the page to find a beautiful line drawing of a temple. Layers of squares built upon each other, leading up to pagoda-like structure.

While Teal'c checked more books and wandered through other parts of the university, Daniel sat at one of the tables with the temple book, working on the language. He was interested in the temple because it was the first indication of a religion on Fasahlqi. When Teal'c returned and told him it was getting dark, Daniel picked up the book, checked with the man at the front desk, and took it with him.

At dinner, he asked Kansharan about it. They were sitting cross-legged on floor pillows on the balcony of Kansharan's residence. The balcony jutted out into the inland sea. Hanging oil lamps swung as soft sea breezes jostled them.

Kansharan took the book from Daniel's hands and looked through it. "Yes, this is a famous place. A temple of the old style. I can arrange a tour for you tomorrow, if you like."

"Oh, yes, please," Daniel said. He was aware of

Jack's gaze locking onto him. He braced himself for Jack's flat refusal.

Instead, Jack gave a slight nod to Kansharan and said nothing.

Later, when SG-1 was alone on the balcony, bunking down with their packs among the floor pillows, Daniel said, "That was easy."

Sam took off her boots. "What was?"

"The tour of the temple." Daniel glanced at Jack, who was stretching out on his back. It was strange how sometimes, like now, he looked about 15 years older than he really was. He wore the weariness he felt, Daniel supposed.

Jack said, "Kansharan's been hiding something. He gets cagey when I bring up the naqada. Maybe getting him away from the negotiating table isn't a bad idea."

Daniel leafed through the book again, looking at illustrations of the temple's foundations and brickwork.

Early the next morning, Kansharan escorted them to the temple in a mule-drawn carriage driven by two young boys. Kansharan sat in the covered back with SG-1 and served them bitter tea and hard, flat bread.

"The other books in the library seemed to be about mining, mostly," Daniel said. "What does the university teach?"

"All branches of knowledge," Kansharan answered. "Mining and the earth sciences most particularly. I hope Major Carter will be able to fill some gaps in our knowledge." He smiled at Sam.

Sam smiled back. "I hope so, too."

Jack shifted again, uncomfortable on the cart's bench. "I'm sure we can come to some arrangement."

"Of course." Kansharan's smile faded and he turned to watch the scenery outside. He looked older. Daniel had thought him in his late twenties, but now he saw harsh lines in Kansharan's face and doubled his estimate. Kansharan's long brown hair was pulled back in a braid, and he wore a loose black shirt over wide-cut black trousers. Like all Fasahlqians, he went barefoot.

The cart climbed for hours before stopping. They got out and stretched below fast-moving grey clouds.

"Will we beat the rains?" Sam asked.

Kansharan looked up at the sky. "The day rains often pass the temple and go further south. We may be lucky today."

As it turned out, they weren't. During the steep climb up the steps set into the huge brick slabs of the temple, the rain started, but it was a tamer rain, a nuisance but not a threat. The temple's construction was ruggedly solid, and the signs of its age and disuse were the softened corners and small weeds growing between bricks and the feeling that no one had climbed these steps in living memory.

They reached the top, a round pavilion open on all sides. Tall columns held the rounded roof. Everything was made of deep ochre brick.

They sat on the floor under the roof to rest after the climb and wait for the the rain to stop. When it cleared, Kansharan pointed ahead. "The inland sea." It was miles away, a murky red splotch on the horizon.

"When my grandfather was a boy, he said he could see the city from here on clear days, but I doubt we will be so fortunate."

Daniel stood up and looked up at the columns and ceiling. "What are these carvings?"

Kansharan glanced at them. "Pictures of the old gods. The old superstitions."

"Old gods?" Jack cocked an eyebrow and looked at the column nearest to him.

"Yes," said Kansharan distractedly, looking down the steps to the cart waiting below. "I must go see to your afternoon meal. If I leave those boys alone too long, they're liable to eat it themselves."

He hurried off, and Jack stood up, resting his fists on his hips and arching his head back to look at the ceiling. "See? Cagey."

"More like uninterested," Daniel said, touching one of the columns and following a sculpted line.

Teal'c stood in front of another column. "I do not recognize these gods."

Daniel turned around to look, and his eyes followed the incised lines from the bottom to the top. Daniel stared at the design while Teal'c moved on to another column. Two -- no, three -- grotesque shapes with long necks and long limbs and huge angry eyes, climbing over one another, hands grasping. No, not climbing. The female in the middle curved into an S while the male below her sodomized her with an exaggeratedly long phallus and gripped her breasts,

pushing them up. The male above held her neck back to insert his phallus into her mouth. It would have looked like a rape except the female was smiling and her large eyes were greedy. Teardrop shapes dripped from her crudely outlined vagina.

The other columns were variations on a theme: a male copulating with another male who performed oral sex on a female fellating him; both males copulating with the female who held her vagina open to accept them; the female squatting over the mouth of a male while the other male fellated him; a male squatting over the mouth of the female while the other male copulated with her; and one male copulating with the other who copulated with the female. The late afternoon sunlight cast the carvings in stark shadows and sharp relief. The bodies seemed to move, the lines were so fluid, but their faces were all fixed and stationary, grinning or contorted, with mad eyes.

The obscene figures were meant to engender a response, and Daniel shifted his gaze away from them before the response became too final. He saw Sam and noticed her quick blush as her eyes met his, then she looked elsewhere and walked over to the steps where Teal'c was watching Kansharan and the cart. That left Jack, standing still in front of one column, not even making the expected jokes.

Daniel looked up at the ceiling. It was painted black, with the outline of an eye done in red. The contrast of the colors, and the clammy warmth in the pavilion, and the arousing, vulgar obscenity around him made Daniel feel faintly queasy. He walked over to one edge and sat down.

Jack sat down near him a few minutes later. "Fertility?" he asked.

Daniel closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead with his thumb to ward off an incipient headache. "Two men and one woman in all the designs. Seems more complex than fertility."

"Ah." Jack was silent for a while. Daniel gave up on the headache. It was a low, dull one.

Jack said, "They don't even look like they're having fun. It seems more... fierce than that."

Daniel opened his eyes. "Maybe fierce is fun for them." He glanced over, and Jack was watching him.

"Maybe," said Jack. He looked at Daniel for a

moment longer before his gaze slid away, to the brick floor. "Some people, that's what it takes."

Daniel stared at him. Blurrily, because the headache was hitting him right behind the eyes. "Are we still talking about them?" he asked, and regretted it, because that question was game-playing, and he and Jack had an unacknowledged agreement not to play games. War, perhaps, but never games.

"About whom else would we be talking?" Jack asked, and his voice was quietly nasty, as befitted a game.

"Never mind," Daniel said, turning away and looking out across the ochre earth below. "I have a headache. It's hard to think."

Jack patted his shoulder once before rocking back and pulling himself up in one enviably smooth motion. "You think too much. Take a break. You and Carter are heading for a spin-out."

Kansharan returned with a basket of bread, a sour pear-like fruit, and more tea. He gave the columns only a cursory glance.

"Did you learn anything interesting, Doctor Jackson?" he asked politely. He poured some tea and handed it to Sam.

"I'm curious about these gods," Daniel said. "Who are they? What do they represent?"

Kansharan bowed his head, the Fasahlqian equivalent of a shrug. "They're old gods. I wasn't taught their names. The book you borrowed should explain it."

Daniel noticed Jack raised an eyebrow at this, but Kansharan wasn't being cagey, he simply didn't know. The temple was old and unused. If no one followed the old religion and no one recorded it, then the knowledge was lost. It happened all the time. The same trappings of Earth, the same mistakes.

On the way back to the city, Daniel pressed Kansharan into helping him translate passages in the book, but the answers weren't there, either. It was a rudimentary guidebook with an architectural focus. Many pages devoted to the composition, size, shape, and regularity of the bricks, and the geometrical proportions of the temple base. The obscene figures were dismissed in one sentence: *There are curious carvings on the columns at the top of the temple.* And the book's comment on who built the temple and why: *Unknown.*

After dinner, Jack and Daniel sat alone on the

balcony in Kansharan's house. Teal'c had found a quiet room to do his kel-no-reem. Kansharan, whom Daniel belatedly realized had been trying to flirt with Sam, had asked her to explain her findings on the naqada alloy to him.

An oil lamp rocked as a warm breeze blew up from the water. Orange light streaked back and forth across the floor. Daniel watched Jack untying his boot laces.

Jack said without looking up, "I keep thinking about those damn carvings."

"So do I."

Jack looked up then, briefly. "Are you going to include drawings of them in your report? 'Cause I'd love to see Hammond's face when he reads it if you do." He smiled in that not-quite-smiling way he had.

Daniel shook his head and looked out at the sea, a dark line under a dark sky. "Not relevant," he said.

"If they were goa'ulds, it would be."

Daniel glanced at him. Jack had taken off his jacket and was lying back, resting his head on a pillow. "I don't think goa'uld -- regular goa'uld, who aren't queens -- have human sex." He paused and swallowed against the foul, bitter taste in his mouth. "Normally," he added.

Jack closed his eyes. "Well, that explains a lot." He rubbed his hands down his face and yawned.

"Why did you think they were goa'uld?" Daniel asked. He sat back and leaned against the balcony wall.

"I don't know. Their eyes were weird." Jack wiped one hand over his forehead.

Daniel brushed a hand over his pants. "Maybe it was easier to imagine them as goa'uld, rather than human, because if they were human, they could be anybody. They could be you and me and Sam."

Jack opened his eyes and tilted his head to look at him. He was silent for a moment, mouth a grim, hard line. The orange light of the oil lamp made him look sunburnt. He said, "Is that what you thought?"

"Isn't it what you thought?"

"Not exactly," Jack said. He paused and added, "Partially."

"Which part?"

"Daniel..."

Daniel held up one finger to his lips. "Don't answer that. I don't need to know."

Jack stared at him for a few more moments, then closed his eyes and draped one arm across them. Daniel sat in the warm breeze until he felt drowsy, then slid onto his side and pulled a pillow into place under his head.

"Huh," Jack said in the vast quiet.

"What?"

"There's something you don't need to know."

Jack said nothing more, and Daniel eased into sleep. He felt steadfast and unable to collapse. Life went on, the same old shit.

They stayed on Fasahlqi two more days before Kansharan agreed to give SG-1 a few small bars of naqada from his mines. He handed them to Sam, and Daniel could see in his eyes that Kansharan was all the more taken with her because she had not returned any of his flirting. It was the touching, gentle stupidity of a crush, and Daniel almost envied Kansharan his oblivious hope.

Kansharan's cart took them back to the stargate, and they arrived home with the naqada. Mission successful and no need to mention the temple carvings.

Daniel didn't mention them in his report, but he dreamed about them, and saw them when he closed his eyes. Fixed stares and contorted bodies and hard cocks and wet cunts. The temple builders knew: pornography was a drug. It induced chemical reactions. It stayed with you, made you crave it.

Jack knew it, too. He watched Daniel with shrewd hungry eyes, made flat unfunny jokes, moved restlessly, emphasizing his physicality. The images were burned in their brains, and why they should be there, above anything else, Daniel couldn't explain. Perhaps it was something as simple as ochre dirt and blood red water. Dirt simple, blood basic.

Daniel planned for this awkward awareness between them to last for a while, then disappear at the next argument or the next stupid misunderstanding. He wasn't going to act on it. He wasn't very surprised when Jack did.

He stood with the door open, tempted not to let Jack in, because Jack's intent was clear in his eyes. But the temptation wasn't strong enough, no match for obscene craving. He finally stepped back and let Jack

into his apartment.

Jack paced into the living room, paced around it, caged and restless. Daniel stood back and watched him. Jack took off his jacket. "Those damn carvings," he muttered.

Daniel took off his glasses and set them on a bookshelf. He switched off the lights and left the apartment in early evening pale. He stopped in front of Jack and pulled off his shirt. Jack looked at his chest, moved his gaze back up to meet Daniel's eyes. Daniel licked his lips, which were dry.

"Do you want to kiss?" Jack asked.

"No," said Daniel.

"Neither do I. I just want to get off." Jack unhooked his belt and bent down to take off his shoes.

"Yes," said Daniel, undoing his fly and sliding his pants off. He reached into his undershorts and stroked himself, already getting there. "Why me?"

Jack stripped out of his shirt. "You think I'm going to risk my career for someone I don't even know? Besides, I can trust you, and you can trust me."

Daniel squeezed his shaft, felt its heat cook his palm. "Yes. Okay." He watched Jack unbutton his fly and pull his jeans off. Jack's prick tented his undershorts. "I want to be fucked," Daniel said.

Jack stared at him, that intense bad-ass look. "Have you been fucked before?"

"No." Daniel pulled on his cock a few times and let go, let it stand out straight as he slid his underwear off. "Have you?"

"Yes."

"You like it?"

"Yes." Jack rubbed his cock through his underwear, rubbed his balls.

"You want me to fuck you?"

"Yes." Jack was sweating already, Daniel could smell it above his own musky scent.

Jack kept rubbing himself through his underwear with one hand, and leaned over and grabbed his jacket with the other. He held it up for Daniel. "There's lube in there. Secret stash." He not-quite-smiled. "No condoms. I figure you know my germs as well as I know yours."

Daniel took the lube from the inside pocket and opened it. "And you like the feel of it."

"Yes." Jack tossed his jacket aside. He slid off his undershorts, and his prick stood flat against his belly, dark and long and slender.

Daniel slathered lube on his cock. "Bend over."

Jack glanced around, picked the old dresser Daniel used as a side table -- Nick's old dresser, inherited after Nick had checked into the asylum, a heavy wooden relic from the old country. Jack bent forward and leaned on his elbows. He spread his legs and raised his ass.

Daniel greased his fingers and stuck them into Jack's hole, liked the quick little clasp in response before Jack relaxed for him. He circled his fingers and spread them, remembered doing this to Sarah. Love always died, but life went on.

He pumped his fingers inside Jack a few times, got Jack's hips to rock with wanting, then pulled out, swirled more lube on his dick, pressed it to Jack's hole and plunged inside. Jack was nice and tight and didn't make a sound. He stayed still while Daniel filled him and searched for the best angle. And when Daniel found the spot, Jack clutched the dresser with one hand and grabbed his cock with the other.

"Fierce is fun?" Daniel asked.

"Sometimes," Jack said, voice breathy.

Now sometimes. Daniel took hold of Jack's hips and drew back to ram into him, kept battering into his tight hole, slamming into his muscular, bony ass. Daniel's cock was so hard and full, and he swelled and ached whenever Jack pushed back and grunted and asked for more. Sweat poured down Daniel's back, over his ass, down his thighs as they slapped and stuck against Jack's. It was strange how there could be a chill in the bones, yet the flesh was burning.

Jack's hand flew as he jerked himself off, fast, fierce, furious. When his body rocked and spasmed, he pushed up from the dresser. He gripped the head of his dick and shot his come into his fingers, some splattered onto his stomach. The potent smell, the tight friction, the elation of shared desperation sent Daniel over. He arched and pumped his come deep into Jack's ass.

Spent, he pulled out, and Jack gathered up his clothes and disappeared into the bathroom. He emerged cleaned and dressed. Daniel washed up hurriedly and pulled on his underwear.

When he came out, Jack was standing at the open

balcony door, hands thrust in his pockets, watching the sky lose its last color. Daniel threw on a shirt and stood next to him.

"I guess we needed this," he said.

Jack gave a little shrug. "I guess life goes on." He paused for a moment. "I'm not sure how I feel about this."

"I'm not asking you to feel anything."

Jack turned and looked at him. "Okay," he said with the not-a-smile.

Daniel closed the balcony door against the cold air. "Our problem is that we understand each other," he said.

"Except when we don't."

Daniel tilted his head and smiled. "It's a problem, it's a blessing, who can tell?"

Jack rocked on his feet, once, looked around the darkened apartment, and sighed. "Life goes on."

"It always does."

Jack walked on, charting his way through the apartment until he reached the door. He opened it, didn't look back, and left.

Daniel padded into the kitchen to scrounge up dinner. He felt solid, and steadfast, and defended. It was survival, and the wastelands all looked the same from here.

(the end)

August 2002